

Divorce and Children

Perhaps the single most important factor in determining how your children adjust to the divorce is something parents do control: how they interact with each other.

Almost all divorcing couples will experience a certain amount of hostility toward each other during their divorce, and that conflict sometimes continues for a time following the divorce while the family adjusts to its new structure. But when conflict continues for years, the negative consequences for the children can be profound. The more intense the conflict between parents, the greater the potential for damage to children. Likewise, the longer conflict continues, the greater the risk of long-term negative effects on children. You and your ex-spouse may be raising children together for years to come, and working towards an effective co-parenting relationship from the moment you make the decision to divorce is one of the greatest gifts you can give your children.

Children love both parents, and see themselves as being part Mom and part Dad. When one parent attacks the other – even where no physical violence is present – children feel personally injured. Avoid discussing these subjects with and around your children:

- Negative comments about the other parent (and their family and friends)
- The divorce process and events leading up to it
- Money in the context of child support
- Details of the other parent's life or your children's time with their other parent
- The other parent's relationships

You damage your children and inhibit their ability to adjust to a new situation when you put them in the middle of communication between parents. Never ask a child to keep secrets or to spy on their other parent. Give your child the space and support to love both parents. If you have questions about parenting practices in the other parent's home, discuss it with the other parent before you discuss the situation with your children. If your child reports an event that seems troubling, say, "I need to talk with your mom/your dad about that." You can then gather necessary information, and you are sending a clear message to your child that you and their other parent are united where children are concerned.

While it is crucial to support and listen to your children, it is impossible (and unwise) for parents to be children's sole source of support and comfort

during and after divorce. Children are often highly attuned to a parent's emotional state and children can take on the task of helping Mom or Dad to feel better -- sometimes at the expense of their own emotional well-being. In addition, children typically find it difficult to be completely open with their parents about their experience of the divorce. Both parents will likely be more emotionally fragile than normal as they find their own ways to heal and regroup after divorce, so outside resources can be most helpful.

Information about helping children adjust to divorce is frequently available at the community level through child and family service agencies, and many therapists specialize in helping families transition through divorce. Therapy provides a safe place for a child to speak openly and attend to his or her needs without having to worry about hurting a parent's feelings. School teachers are excellent sources of information about how your child is adjusting outside of the home, and school counselors can be a good starting point for conversations between your child and a therapist.

The Collaborative Law process gives parents the opportunity to divorce in a way that will preserve that important part of their relationship that involves raising children. The Collaborative Law process brings a team of professionals together including child specialists to help parents to restructure their relationship in an environment that does not pit them against each other, but can instead help them create new, more effective ways to communicate and work together for the benefit of all concerned.