



The Do's and Don'ts of Divorce for Parents

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An important note from James:

Divorce is a very complex occurrence that takes place within the family. This article will not attempt to cover all of the many nuances and intricacies involved in dealing with children who are experiencing a divorce. There are therapists who deal specifically with divorces as well as many books written on the effects of divorce on children and on parents. Many towns have programs committed to working with children of divorced families, which can be very effective in helping kids come to terms with what's going on. All of these options should be considered. I hope this article will offer some useful ideas, but I want to stress the fact that it is not meant as a substitute for a broader understanding of divorce and its effect on parents and children.

Being structured and clear after a divorce is much more helpful to kids than compromising your values because your children are going through a tough time.

There are as many types of divorces as there are types of families, and each family creates their own little theater in which the divorce is acted out. For some families, divorce emanates from the adults not being able to get along, solve problems or communicate effectively. In other families, the divorce is the recognition that things are not working for the good of everyone involved. In certain families, divorce is a way to get out of an abusive or destructive relationship, in which case those children ultimately benefit psychologically, even though they will still face fears and even feel loyalty toward the offending parents.

The reason why a divorce is very traumatic for the children involved is because things are changing for them completely and the future is unknown. The most powerful people in their lives have decided to go on a completely different course. Kids use their parents to manage their fears of the unknown. When kids get anxious about the future, they have an unconscious mechanism that tells them their parents will take care of whatever it is that's bothering them. They do this often and without thinking about it. Divorce can be considered traumatic because it overpowers the children involved. They don't have the tools or the experience to manage the overwhelming feelings and changes that are happening in their lives. They

tend to deal with them in different ways, depending upon what the personality and nature of the child is. "Fear" is often the core feeling they have: Fear that they're going to lose things they have, and fear that they're not going to have things they want. What you'll see in some cases is that one child will buckle down and do OK in school, and the other child will give up and stop working. These two very different reactions may even occur in the same family. What that means is that one child is dealing with his fear and insecurity through isolating, while the other child is focusing on external things like schoolwork and sports. Some children deal with their fear and anger by acting their emotions out and striking out at others. One withdraws into the fort; the other goes out to meet the enemy.

The major emotions involved with divorce are fear, anger, and grief. The general fear for children is that things are changing and they don't know what they're changing into. The anger is that they have no control or power over the situation. And grief emanates from the very real fact that the family they knew has perished. It's as if it died, and they must, over time, grieve that family. As a parent, you will see the behaviors that characterize anger, fearfulness and grief. The anger might be viewed through verbal or physical acting out, through increased oppositionality and defiance, behavioral acting out in school, or anger and frustration taken out on other siblings or the residing parent. The fearfulness manifests itself through a process of shutting down. Kids will isolate emotionally and physically, spending more time in their rooms or out of the house. They may appear more secretive. They are withdrawing into themselves because of some instinctual feeling they have that this is the best way to protect themselves. And you'll see kids act out the stages of grief. They may bargain with their parents and try to figure out how to keep them together, they'll be in denial about the significance of the divorce; they'll be angry about what it means to them and eventually, if it's a healthy grieving process, they'll come to accept it, but that takes time and work. No matter how the kids handle the divorce, they generally don't want to talk about it to either parent, which creates problems for parents who desperately want their children to understand what's going on from their perspective.

Kids draw their strength from a variety of sources, but most of all from their parents and their family system. When kids are younger, their parents and family are their sole source of strength. As they develop, school performance, friends and sports become sources of strength, depending upon the individual child. So the first thing parents have to understand is that when the divorce is announced, the kids are going to experience a lot of insecurity about what the future holds. Parents may also feel that insecurity themselves, but they feel empowered to manage it. Children are completely dependent. It's a sad fact that many children go into poverty after a divorce because the money that used to support one household is now going to support two. The biggest cause of poverty among single parent families in America is divorce. So it puts fear in children. They wonder "What's going to happen to my parents? Are we going to have enough food? Will I have clothes? Can I still go to the mall on Fridays? Will we be able to do the same things?" These questions all float around in the kids' heads. Some fears have to do with the well-being of the parents and of the family, and some are age appropriately self-centered. And parents will do well to focus on these things when they talk to the child about the divorce.

Develop a Culture of Accountability in Your Home

Single parents have to develop a culture of accountability in their home once the separation or divorce has taken place. A "culture of accountability" position is one that says, "You are still accountable for your

behavior here at home.” So no matter what else is going on outside the house or whatever feelings the child is having, including those that come from legitimate sources, the child is responsible for his or her behavior. I would say that being structured and clear after a divorce is much more helpful to kids than compromising your values because your children are going through a tough time. Remember, it’s during tough times that we need reliable structure the most. Limits, accountability, parental support, outside support when necessary—these are all part of a culture of accountability in the family. Kids experience a whole range of emotions when a separation and divorce occur. Remember that “divorce” and “separation” are legalistic terms. Once one parent moves out, the kids’ adverse emotional experience begins, no matter how it’s labeled.

Have structure that clearly sets out the responsibilities of each child, outline the way they have to treat each other and the way they have to treat you as the parent. Make sure the limits are clear. Issues such as curfews, use of phone, computer and TV time, expectations around schoolwork and other commitments should all be kept very clear. Hold kids accountable for not meeting their responsibilities. And don’t let things slide because of your divorce. You certainly don’t have to be punitive, but you have to be consistent. Be available to your kids if they want to talk about the divorce or any other subject, and let them know you’re available to talk about things without specifically citing the divorce. Seek outside support when necessary. Certain types of counseling can be very helpful to kids who are experiencing the feelings of grief after a divorce. Also, if children are older and they test the limits by being physical or threatening, do not hesitate to call the police. There are many situations where kids sense a vacuum of power, and they will try to fill it if the parent does not. This can be especially troublesome in families where there is an adolescent, or families where the children don’t reside with the parent who was the primary limit-setter.

Do’s and Don’ts of Parenting after a Divorce

There are many “do’s” and “don’ts” for parents after a divorce, but here are a few that I think are crucial:

- Don’t push kids to talk about the divorce if they don’t want to. Be inviting, but not demanding. Let them know there are other resources available to them outside of the family.
- Do hold kids accountable for their behavior. If kids are acting out, be clear with them. Let them know that even if they’re acting out because of the divorce, they’ll still be held accountable for their behavior.
- Don’t talk negatively about the other parent. It’s never a good idea.
- Don’t jump into another relationship and expect kids to be accepting of that person. That may soothe *your* sense of loss, but for kids, it’s only confusing and frustrating
- Don’t try to have deep, meaningful conversations with your kids about the divorce. They may act “adultified,” but they are not little adults.
- Do acknowledge that things have changed.
- Don’t share all your fear, anxiety, anger resentment or grief with your children. They’re not at a level of development where they can handle that. Often, it makes them feel like they have to take care of you, and that’s not a good position for them to be in.

- Do family organizational planning and structuring without emotions. Sit down and let kids know what roles are going to change. Don't do it democratically. Don't ask for opinions or votes. It's not helpful to kids to put that responsibility on them.

“Dad lets me do it at his house.”

As I mentioned, a single parent has to develop the culture of accountability in their household. What happens at mom's house or dad's house is none of your business, except in cases of safety. Do not let it become part of your child's alibi system. When your son or daughter says, “Dad lets me do this at his house,” tell them that they'll have to wait until they get back to Dad's house until they do it again, because in your home there are consequences for that behavior. You may feel frustrated with the way your ex parents your children, but don't try to control what goes on in the other parent's home. That's a dead end street. There are many situations where parents cooperate with each other after the separation or divorce, but let's face it, people divorce because they don't like each other any more, so cooperation can only go so far.

Another issue is that many ex-spouses tell their children details of the marriage that you would rather they didn't know. This is a common occurrence and parents have to work on not giving it power. First of all, if you show your child that this information has power over you, that child is going to use it in certain situations. So the idea is to say something like, “Whatever your mother says at her house, just discuss it with her. This is not a place to talk about it.” I personally don't think you should discuss specifics about the divorce. I think you should say, “That's Mom's opinion. You'll have to talk to her about that. In my house, I don't blame your mother, and I don't let her blame me.” Understand this: Separation and divorce usually don't occur or don't emanate from a peaceful, easygoing marital situation. There are often occurrences such as strong arguments and fights, blaming, cursing, and bad feelings which precede the actual separation or divorce. For better or worse, kids have witnessed what's occurred and they will know the truth. Parents who use the “Culture of Accountability” model teach kids that using excuses and blaming others does not justify their inappropriate or irresponsible behavior.

If you teach your children not to make excuses and not to justify inappropriate behavior, they will be better prepared to identify when the other parent is using excuses and justifications to explain their behavior.

When is family counseling in order?

Family counseling is a very tricky issue. Some therapists will say that it should not include both parents because it is artificial, and helps kids promote the normal fantasy that their parents will get back together. On the other hand, there are therapists who believe that even if there's a divorce, the family should address it as a whole system. There are a lot of variables that come into play when deciding which course to take with which therapist. One thing is clear—your child should have the option of seeing someone, but they should not be forced to if they're managing the divorce effectively. If your child is having behavior problems which either stem from or are intensified by the divorce, the help should be based on him or her learning to manage the problems and feelings underlying the behavior.

My opinion is that therapy should be flexible enough to involve everyone in various combinations, but still avoid involving sessions with both the parents and the children present unless absolutely necessary.

Before those sessions, strict ground rules and agendas must be agreed upon by both parents. Remember, it is very likely the differences in perception, interpretation, and behaviors which led to the divorce in the first place could be acted out in the artificial situation. In some cases, kids will not want to participate in these types of therapeutic activities. In my experience, if kids are managing the divorce and the other areas of their life well, they should not be pushed to be involved. On the other hand, if they're having behavioral or academic performance problems, behavior management therapy should be on the menu.

Divorce carries an inherent risk of damage to the children involved. The more quickly the adults going through the divorce take responsibility for being parents instead of spouses, the better the chances the children will have of adjusting to the new reality of their lives.

Read more: <http://www.empoweringparents.com/Dos-and-Donts-of-Divorce-for-Parents.php#ixzz2RJ8DSrYI>