

GUIDELINES FOR DIVORCED AND DIVORCING PARENT

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After nearly twenty years of practice in family law, thirty years of parenting, and divorce, I have observed and experienced the good, bad and indifferent approaches to parenting children who find themselves in the middle of their parents' divorce. Parenting is a life circumstance that can only be experienced. There are no courses or books capable of conveying the depth of experiences that occur in parenting. Parenting in a healthy, intact marriage is a challenge. Issues and value differences, never reasonably anticipated before children are born, develop with lightening speed. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations and conflict inevitably result. Resolution is necessary for the child to grow and develop. Successfully married parents find ways to accommodate the parenting differences, largely out of trust. Divorced parents have most often abandoned or lost the trust that began the parenting part of the marriage relationship. Respect for the child's right and need to have a relationship with both parents is crucial to his/her recovery from the death of his/her parents' marriage.¹

Children are entitled to and require a relationship with both of their parents. Good or bad, a relationship with both parents allows the child the best opportunity to grow and develop his/her own individual sense of self. The absence of the relationship is what causes the most significant harm. Children who become immeshed with one parent and alienated from another have distorted views of themselves and others. Their own marriages and parenting suffer as a result. You cannot make the other parent be better than what he/she is. You cannot and should not protect your children, except under the most obvious and extreme circumstances, from the other parent. Allowing your child to have his/her own relationship with the other parent means allowing his/her to experience the reality of that parent— even when it hurts. Perhaps Dad is always making promises he can't or won't keep. When Mom interferes, covers up, lies, or excuses Dad's failings, she promotes a false reality and prevents the child from coming to terms with disappointment, a natural fact of life. When Dad alienates the child from the Mom because of a marital indiscretion, he promotes in the child a sense of distrust

¹ Such extreme language is warranted. Just as if a parent or parents are lost to a child by car accidents or disease, the end of the marriage frequently means the end of the quality and frequency of access for the child to both parents. One moves away and the other becomes emotionally unavailable. Even under the best of circumstances these realities occur and the harm happens; the degree of harm is controlled only by the maturity and respect the parents can garner for the child.

and abandonment which can follow the child in relationships for the rest of his or her life. Divorcing parents don't intend to harm their children. They cause intense and long-term harm to their children due to their own intense pain. Divorcing parents can minimize the pain their children experience by consistently putting the child's needs first. The easiest way to accomplish that difficult task is to remember that the other parent is the person you chose to be your child's other parent. Your child deserves to see and believe that there is respect between his or her parents, even if there is strong disagreement about every conceivable issue. The following are list of ideas and suggestions to help you accomplish this very difficult task.

- In every way possible let the child know that the divorce is not his/her fault.
- Never attribute negative behavior of the child to the other parent's influence.
- Parenting is not a competition. Children naturally and normally are drawn to one parent over the other at different stages of development. Interruption of this normal attraction stymies the child's ability to grow and develop his/her own individual sense of self.
- Children use their radar to feel the atmosphere of the parents. Your mood, attitude and beliefs don't have to be expressed to be known. You may hate what the other parent has done and how he/she is living his/her life. But if you hate him/her, you are communicating hate for the other person most dear in your child's life. If you teach them to hate that person, you are also as likely to be teaching them to find reasons to hate you in the future too.
- Fight the urge to accept the child's natural ambivalence toward either or both parents as a reason to avoid the relationship with the child. A child's job, from birth on, is to grow into a separate and distinct personality. The most significant gift you can give a child is the knowledge that you will always be there for him/her, even when he/she is most unlovable. Children most resent the consequence of divorce that interferes with their lives – their friends and activities.
- Accept the differences in your parenting styles. Children need exposure to both the parent who makes sure his/her hair is cut, homework done and in order and the parent who takes the kids for a bike ride while the dishes sit in the sink and forgets to check the backpack for homework (whose homework is it anyway?). One parent is setting the standards while the other allows the children to experience the setting of their own standards.

- Be on time. Don't make commitments you can't keep. Don't accept responsibility or make the other parent responsible for the relationships with the adults in the child's life. Get your own copy of the school calendar; talk to the teachers and coaches yourself. Make yourself available to the schools and camps. Let them know you exist and are interested. Ask them to help you be a more meaningful presence in your child's life.
- Parenting should include both the fun times and the not so fun times. Parents should be setting limits— they can be different but, obviously, the more consistency there is for the child the better. Household chores, homework, and planning projects give the child a sense of investment in both households.
- Help the child remember the other parent's birthday, special days and family events. If you and the child bake cookies or pick flowers, have the child set aside some for the other parent. It's not a gift from you— it's a lesson in giving and respect for your child.
- Communication with the other parent is crucial to the well-being of your child. Even if you can only communicate by voicemail or fax, let the other parent know issues and concerns. Call immediately if there is illness or a school concern.
- Respect the privacy of the child's relationship with the other parent. Except for the verifiable concerns about emotional or physical abuse, don't listen to phone calls, spy, or otherwise engage in sabotage.
- When parenting concerns arise— work which cannot be settled between parents— use the services of a neutral, such as a child psychologist, pastor, rabbi or priest to discuss means of resolution. If your first resort is a lawyer, you have already failed your child.
- Money issues, whether it is the payment of child support on time or not at all, the amount (too much – too little), buying affection through lots of gifts, or the refusal to buy things (“that's what I pay child support for”) only hurt the child.
- Your children will be experiencing a conflict in their loyalty to both parents. Don't make it worse. Let them know in every way possible that they have permission to love the other parent. The choice to end the relationship was yours, not your child's. Suggesting, no matter how subtly, that love or

allegiance to the other parent is misplaced will only encourage the child to become secretive. The lack of choice the child experiences in the divorce results in feelings of powerlessness. To be powerless is to compel reliance on the most basic and unhealthy of resources a human being has— manipulation, cunning and lying— not a very healthy way to grow up.