

Child-Centered Divorce

7 Ways to Protect Your Children



■ by Melinda Hammond, PsyD, Clinical Psychologist

In God's perfect plan, marriage is forever. Unfortunately, we live in a fallen world and sometimes divorce is inevitable. When children are involved, divorce becomes more complicated. But there's hope. Studies have shown that how parents relate after a divorce can act as a protective factor for children, and is often more powerful than the pre-divorce relationship. Children whose parents maintain a cooperative relationship after divorce are protected from many harmful effects.

So if divorce is inevitable (or has already happened), how can you protect your children?

1. Focus on your own behavior. When we're in conflict, our first instinct is to focus on the other person: what they've done wrong, what they should change, how they've hurt us. But you cannot change or control that person's behavior. You can control your own. So when life feels out of control, and your instinct tells you it's the other person's fault, take a deep breath, a walk, and focus on what you can control. You can control the rules in your own home, the environment you create for your child, and the type of relationship you cultivate.

As you read this list, you may have the urge to point out where your ex-spouse has fallen short. Don't. Focus on your own behavior, since you cannot change anyone else's.

2. Communicate. Find a low-conflict way to communicate with your co-parent. This may be a shared calendar, e-mail, text, phone calls, or even a website set up specifically to facilitate communication.

3. Avoid talking about the other parent. Your child is a sponge; he or she soaks up what you say. Your child is made of 50% you, 50% the other parent. So if you speak ill of your ex-spouse, your child may feel like part of them is "bad." Kids are smart. If your ex is truly a bad person, your children will figure it out on their own. If what you have to say isn't necessary ("time to go to your moms!") or unequivocally positive ("your dad was really good at badminton, so I bet you'll be good, too!"), leave it unsaid.

4. Keep "grown up land" for the grown-ups. Kids don't need to know about child support payments or who is supplying their needs. Furthermore, children need to feel like the people in charge are confident in their choices. With few exceptions, visitation, living arrangements and other adult topics should be left to the adults. Don't be afraid of letting kids give input, but the ultimate decision should lie with the adults. Finally, your child cannot be your go-between. Kids should never be left to send messages, correspondence or anything else between their parents.

5. Don't fight in front of the children. This one seems obvious, but is much harder in practice. If drop-offs and pick-ups are full of tension, kids will have a more difficult time adjusting. Practice firm boundaries such as "we're not talking about this now." If an argument does break out, avoid calling your partner names or threatening him/her.

6. Stop worrying about who is right. No one wins a divorce. Unless you want to be stuck in that pattern forever, you'll have to learn to let go of the ways you were wronged, and the ways you might be wronged in the future. If not for your own sake, for the sake of your children.

7. Take care of yourself. Your children need you. Not only that, but they need the best you. If you're not taking care of yourself, no one else will. Make sure you're eating well, getting enough sleep and exercising. Find some new hobbies that feed your soul. As parents, it's often easy to forget about our own needs, but if our needs aren't being met, it's difficult to meet the needs of our children.

Divorce is difficult for everyone involved, and unfortunately its impact is often biggest on children. By providing them a safe, stable environment and caring for yourself, you can minimize their suffering. ■



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