

Respect, Love, Care: Even After Divorce

■ by Gregory Rodriguez, MA, LCPC



Divorce. I have experienced it.

I am a father of five - three boys with my first wife and two children with my current wife of almost 19 years. I am also a therapist who has worked with hundreds of parents and children after divorce and can attest to the fact that the way a family “does” divorce determines what longer-lasting effects the divorce will have, especially on the children.

My Divorce Experience

Looking back, I can best describe my divorce experience with a visual. If you can for a moment, imagine being at home with your family. It's nighttime and everyone is getting ready for bed. You become aware that a threat of severe weather is heading your way. You monitor the radar and coverage, but the weather still seems a ways off. After taking some precautions, you surmise that it would be okay to get to bed. A little while later, while everyone is asleep, the severe weather strikes with great force and before you have time to react it's over. You jump out of bed and exit your door to find that the family home around you is devastated. Your immediate attention goes to your children; they appear to be okay physically, but they are shell-shocked, crying, and visibly upset. You take the time to comfort them, assuring them that everything will be okay. You thank God that nobody was physically hurt. A little while later, you begin assessing the damage and pick up the pieces of what was once your life. It's emotionally overwhelming, but you push forward. That is how I experienced divorce. It was the most difficult experience that I have had to go through in my life.

Setting Aside Our Hurts Is Not Easy

It took everything I had and more to rise above the devastation, the hurt, and sadness to insure that I minimize the damaging effects this would have on my three children. I prayed to God for strength.

Along with divorce comes the emotional baggage that, for a time, can be an obstacle to the parent's ability to co-parent. The need to set aside those hurts remains critical in one's ability to co-parent in a way that minimizes the emotionality and focus on what's best for the child. Both parents need to filter all their words and actions through the question, “How will this impact/affect my child?”

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6 Ways to Respect, Love, and Care: What's Best for your Child

1. Keep the children out of the middle! **Do not** use your child as a messenger in making decisions or plans. **Do not** use your child to get information about the other parent. Even a simple "How's your mom/dad doing?" can be emotionally harmful for some children.
2. **Do not** disclose any potentially harmful information to your children in an attempt to negatively influence their feelings towards the other parent. It will come back upon you!
3. **Do** treat and speak about the other parent respectfully. When possible work together towards compromise and cooperation and flexibility. It's important that your children see those skills and attributes, key life lessons they will learn from you! Your children need to see that in spite of what happened, mom and dad can still work together and be respectful.
4. **Do** include the other parent in decision making and plans. Doctor visits, making major decisions (i.e. braces), and other things. I have found this to be a big challenge for many of the couples I see. Not including the other parent in these matters builds resentment and animosity, sometimes even leading the couple back to court for an issue that could have been solved on their own.
5. If possible, when dealing with issues that involve the kids, **do** speak with them together **including** how you tell the kids about divorcing - it makes a huge difference. Hearing two different viewpoints is confusing and in a sense falls under the category of being put in the middle. Never put them in a position to have to choose sides.
6. **A final Do**, it may not be possible to do this together, but if faith is important to you then pray. Pray for the strength to do what is right and fair (that was a prayer I prayed constantly). Pray for your children for strength and courage. Pray for your ex-spouse too!

In summary, divorce is traumatic and WILL influence your children in many different ways. Children are resilient and will survive, but the quality of their emotional life will depend greatly on how you as their parent "do" divorce. I am grateful that our adult boys and grandchildren can experience my ex-wife and I together at our family gatherings, soccer games, etc. Knowing they sense the respect, love and care we can still have for one another years later in spite of being divorced makes all the work it took to get here worthwhile! ■



Gregory Rodriguez, MA, is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and sees clients in our New Lenox, Orland Park, and Shorewood, IL locations.

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