

Coping with the Process of Divorce

Basic Rules of Separation and Divorce

- ✚ Don't go through this period alone.
- ✚ Develop an extensive support network.
- ✚ Become educated about divorce through support groups, therapy and books.
- ✚ Talk to friends and family about the positives and negatives of divorce, so that you do not burden your friendships by always being negative.
- ✚ Be open to what works and what doesn't as you develop your new lifestyle. This is an opportunity for positive change.
- ✚ Care for yourself with soothing activities.
- ✚ Take care of your body through diet and exercise.
- ✚ Find safe and appropriate ways to blow off steam.
- ✚ Keep a *positive* but *realistic* perspective.
- ✚ Increase your interpersonal skills.
- ✚ Watch your language.
- ✚ Use your sense of humor.
- ✚ Be generous toward others.

Checklist for Your Co-Parenting Relationship

- ✚ Use nice words and kind behaviors. Be clear, calm and specific in your requests.
- ✚ Build a business relationship while moving away from the expectations of a romantic relationship.
- ✚ Develop a written plan for conducting initial communication via telephone, fax, or e mail.
- ✚ Move away from blaming and toward problem solving. Be honest, it's not usually "all the other parent's fault."
- ✚ Be courteous and respectful even if you believe the other parent is undeserving. If you have trouble being courteous, imagine that your ex-spouse is a close, same-sex friend and act toward your ex-spouse as you would toward a friend you really like. Impossible? Try it!
- ✚ Expect odd feelings at first over the new relationship with your ex-spouse. This is natural.
- ✚ Do not expect your ex-spouse to read your mind or to meet your needs.

- ✚ Give yourself some privacy and let the other parent have their privacy as well. Don't inquire from anyone about the private details of your ex-spouse's life. That can be a set-up for destructive feelings or behavior on your part.
- ✚ Act like a guest in the other parent's life. Treat your ex-spouse's relatives as though they are guests or business partners as well. Step back from feeling like they are intimate family - that will protect you from saying hurtful things or getting into topics which are too close to the heart. Save heartfelt talks for communications with friends, not our ex-spouse's family members.
- ✚ Don't expect praise or appreciation from the other parent.
- ✚ Keep the children out of the middle of conflict.
- ✚ Do not use your children as go-betweens.
- ✚ Spend alone time each week with each of your children.
- ✚ Remember your children are your gift not your property.

Be Careful to Monitor Your Language

- ✚ This is very important and often overlooked.
- ✚ You need to think of your relationship with the other parent as a business relationship.
- ✚ When you refer to the other parent as "wife" or "husband" or even "ex-spouse," you are still thinking married, not single.
- ✚ Instead, refer to the other parent as "the children's mother/father."
- ✚ An example of this may be saying that the children are "living with" or "being cared for" by the other parent instead of "visiting."
- ✚ Another part to monitoring your language is your use of vocabulary around the children. Be careful to use terms which are supportive not critical of family members and their actions.
- ✚ If you can discover a sense of liking, tolerance or appreciation for any aspect of the other parent's parenting, DO, it will make your children feel more loved and more safe.
- ✚ When you are angry about the actions of your children's other parent, express your feelings outside of the children's presence.
- ✚ Children observe your actions and listen to your words so don't kid yourself and imagine that your children "don't know" how you feel about the other parent.

Conflicts between Parents

Unresolved conflicts between parents harm children:

Conflict frightens children. When children witness traumatic events such as fighting or arguing it elicits fear, panic, and apprehension. Children learn dysfunctional patterns of relating when they witness arguing and fighting between parents, particularly when the parents do not successfully come to agreement at the end of the argument.

Conflict teaches children to fight. Modeling is a powerful form of teaching. When children observe their parents fighting, they learn to be aggressive, controlling and sometimes violent. If your children are "acting-out" observe how you may be teaching them to act-out.

Conflict disrupts child development. Children may get "stuck" in a developmental stage if conflict is traumatic to them. They may have trouble growing socially or emotionally when exposed to intense conflict.

Unresolved conflicts model inappropriate communication, poor problem-solving, aggressive language and poorly managed expression of feelings.

Be Careful to Be A Grown-up

Some parents respond to divorce with a sense of renewed freedom. This can provide an opportunity for growth and change or it can be a time of regression and irresponsibility. Make sure that you are acting like a grown-up during your divorce. Monitor your behavior.

- ✚ Be careful to keep your dating outside of the children's lives until you have a serious long-term partner.
- ✚ Don't introduce your children to partner after partner, dating may be fun for you, but it can be confusing for your children.
- ✚ Spend social time with your friends, but not the exclusion of your children.
- ✚ Be very careful who you leave your children with. Sometimes getting divorced lowers our defenses and allows us to put our children at risk with neglectful or dangerous people.
- ✚ Listen to your instincts.
- ✚ Remember your children depend on you, their needs come first.
- ✚ Watch any resurgence of your "adolescent self." If promiscuity, risk taking or irresponsible behavior surface, seek consultation and guidance from your mature friends and family. Familiarize yourself with the concept of acting out.

- ✚ Don't hop from relationship to relationship.
- ✚ Be careful not to become engaged or remarried too soon.
- ✚ Attend responsibly to the basic needs of your children.
- ✚ Create a balanced life for yourself.
- ✚ Spend some time alone.
- ✚ Become reacquainted with yourself again.
- ✚ Plan, think and design how you want your post-divorce life to take shape. Don't just let it happen. Make it happen.

Understand Your Children's Perspectives

- ✚ Listen to your children.
- ✚ Take their concerns seriously.
- ✚ Observe their words and behavior for any significant changes.
- ✚ Talk responsibly with your children about divorce. Be age-appropriate in the factual information you offer the children.
- ✚ Keep them appropriately advised. Do not keep them "in the dark." But refrain from showing them any court documents, angry letters from your ex-spouse etc.
- ✚ Don't "rain on your children." That means keep your grown-up stuff to yourself. Don't "pour" things on them like your anger, your dependency needs or your shame, take it elsewhere and get good qualified counseling or support from mature friends.
- ✚ Tell your children that you love them.
- ✚ Tell your children you will always take care of them.
- ✚ Show them that you care by doing special activities to comfort them such as walking them to school, putting a new stuffed animal on their bed, or by having them read you a story about divorce, such as The Dinosaur's Divorce.
- ✚ Explain how the children will now have two homes rather than one. Help them to decorate and organize each home, so they have a part in the creating of the new "nests." Help them to have similar comfort toys in each home. Make each home "their home."
- ✚ Tell them, in words, that it's OK to still love both parents, there is enough room for everyone's love to go around.
- ✚ Show by your actions that you and the other parent can cope.
- ✚ Listen to your children's opinions and whenever possible allow them to generate options or choices. Be clear and firm yet flexible.
- ✚ Never threaten your children with abandonment, not even in the midst of

discipline.

- # Remind your children that the divorce is not their fault.
- # Don't lead the children to believe that you and the other parent will reconcile, unless it is a strong possibility.
- # Find comfortable ways to share affection with your children such as hand-holding or hugging.
- # Learn how to discipline your children with love not anger.
- # Speak positively not negatively about the other parent.
- # Consider the children's perspectives about the divorce not just your own.
- # Take a parenting class, even if you are already a terrific parent!
- # Read Mom's house Dad's house by Isolina Ricci as well as In the name of the child by Janet Johnston

Being a Step-Parent - "A Bonus Parent"

One in every three families in the US is a step-family.

Being a bonus parent is a very special role. You are a caretaker, friend, parent, spouse, confident, and supporter.

Develop clear values, rules and expectations in your blended family. Modify them over time.

Become a good planner, look toward the future and practice pro-active planning and intervention.

Anticipate problems before they arise.

Focus on establishing and maintaining a solid marital base.

Protect your marriage.

Don't make your new spouse the messenger between you and the children.

Discuss and deal with all divorce-related issues privately.

Plan on being a team player, forever.

When you blame, you shame, don't do either.

Don't buy distortions, there are always more ways than one to look at a situation.
Talk, talk talk, and more talk with your spouse, partner, children and step-children.

Address the dream of reconciliation thoughtfully.

Consider the developmental needs of each individual child.

Be patient.

Ask for input – from everyone.

Hold family meetings.

Have a family suggestion box.

Consider developing a monthly family newsletter with your children.

Give all of the relationships time.

Expect bumps in the road.

In a high conflict divorce:

- ✚ Know your role. You are a caretaker, a parent, not the parent.
- ✚ You are playing a supportive role. Know your place. Do not usurp the role of the primary parent.
- ✚ Be a voice of reason, not a voice of agitation.
- ✚ Contribute to the lives of the children.
- ✚ Play with the children, enjoy their individual qualities.
- ✚ You are fortunate to have them, and they you.
- ✚ Know that there are two sides to every story.
- ✚ Stay out of the middle.
- ✚ Have the children call you something other than mom or dad, they usually already have a mom or dad. Have them call you by your real first name, or a name from another language which means loved one such as "Muno" "Amado" "Nina" or "Nita".
- ✚ You have an important role in the newly developing family, you are valuable to your spouse and the children. Honor your value.

Model respect.

Guidelines for Becoming a Family with Two Homes

- # Find your own meaning of family, of home, and of parenthood.
- # Respect the crisis periods of transition, learn how you function during times of stress, and increase your personal resources.
- # Let the emotions of the end of your marriage run their course and realistically evaluate your past, in order to foster healthier relationships in the future.
- # Learn how to separate your role as a former mate from that of a parent.
- # When you can grow past the hurt, really try to help your children's other parent(s) by complimenting, sharing information and communicating.
- # Setup your own home, establishing your new family rituals, customs, and rules.
- # Aim for a good "Parenting Agreement" with clearly outlined parental responsibilities.
- # Strengthen ties with supportive others—friends, family, associates, and if necessary, seek new ties.
- # Parent by example.
- # Recognize that holidays may be celebrated anytime of year not only on the designated day.
- # Don't make your children transition several times in one day just so that each parent can "see them" on a given holiday such as Thanksgiving or Halloween.

What Children of Divorce Want

They want harmony -- their parents should not have unresolved and destructive conflict in front of them.

They want love.

They wish to be treated with the same affection as other children in the family.

They want honesty.

They do not want to be lied to.

They want acceptance.

They desire mutual tolerance from both parents.

They want their parents to like their friends.

They want their friends to be welcomed in the home.

They want closeness.

They desire comradeship and playfulness with their parents.

They want their parents to pay attention to them and answer their questions.

They want consideration from their parents -- not to be embarrassed or punished in front of friends.

They want positive support -- for parents to concentrate on their good points rather than their weaknesses.

They want consistency.

They desire parents to be consistent in their affections and moods.

It appears that these children want what all of us want -- respect, consideration and love.