

Divorce from the Kids' Point of View: From Damage Control to Empowerment*

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Conventional wisdom and research strongly suggest that when divorced parents can eventually co-parent, protect their children from their unresolved conflicts, incorporate authoritative parenting skills and maintain good mental health, their children have a good chance to fare well in the long term. These are ideal goals for any family, not just those of divorce. But, during the stressful period prior to the separation and often for several years afterward, even the most dedicated parents are unsteady. These periods are especially challenging when parents have uneven skills for relating to one another, resolving disagreements, or child rearing.

From a child's point of view, separation and divorce can be overwhelming. A child of any age has to cope with the demands of normal development, grieve the loss of the intact family, time with parents, and then also deal with new feelings and fears. There are usually major changes in schedules, residences, and even schools. When parents ask children how they are doing, the answers may be in the neighborhood of "OK", "Fine" when in fact they feel numb, fearful,



or do not have the maturity to describe their concerns or feelings. They cope any way they can.

Parents, as the first and most influential interpreters of a child's experience, assign value and expectations to a child's experience. In a culture where divorce with children is usually viewed as a trag-

edy with children as victims, it is easy to believe that divorce and its aftermath is a black hole with no redeeming value. Parents' interpretation should be more constructive and protective. The role of victim, even when valid, quickly becomes counter-productive. However, if the process is viewed as a long and important road

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trip together, the metaphor reflects a more realistic and hopeful quality. The road and weather can be difficult even scary at times, but it can smooth out as parents learn how to manage the conditions. In addition, there are new experiences and opportunities. It's important for the parent to find the right balance between acknowledgement and support for the child's sense of loss and overwhelm while also providing an assurance that, no matter what, the family does prevail and that there are better days down the road.

Kids May Be Unwilling To Ask Questions

Many children find it difficult to open up and express their fears and needs such as, "Why are things so weird?" "Why can't they just fix it?" "Is my family ruined forever?" "Will I still see my friends?" "Do I have to change schools?" "Can I still go to college?" "Who can I believe?" As noted in *Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids*, children are hungry for information and guidelines, but often lack the words to say or the courage to express themselves. Without this help, their own interpretation of events can be seriously flawed. Asked one courageous girl, "When I grow up, will my Dad hate me like he hates Mom now?" There's a saying, "Children may be excellent observers, but they are often poor interpreters." This is especially true with divorce.

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What Kids Want Parents To Know: a Counselor's Perspective

- We need to know you love us, will protect us, and won't leave us.
- Help us get organized for going back and forth. Be patient.
- Listen to our questions and opinions even if you don't agree.
- Accept that we need a lot of time to adjust, even if we don't show it.
- Keep your conflicts and dislike of each other out of sight and earshot
- Keep us out of the middle of your problems. We are just kids.
- Don't ask us to spy, pass on messages, or hear you put-down the other parent.
- Give us a chance to talk with kids who also are going through this
- Help us express our feelings and learn how to manage them.
- Give us space and time to grieve the loss of our old life at our own pace.
- Confide in people your own age. We are not your substitute spouse.
- Tell us we aren't at fault for your problems. We can't fix them either.
- Show us it's OK to love and want to be with both of you.

From Damage Control to Empowerment: Four Important Keys

Separation and divorce has a way of eroding a child's basic trust. It is essential to reestablish that trust. The Four Keys highlight those interactions that can be especially healing. In real life, these interactions intermingle, but it can be useful to separate them out to highlight the different dimensions.

One: Provide Physical Presence, Assurances, and Play

- Children need parents to be physically present and attentive. For all children, especially the youngest ones, physical contact helps calm their

uneasiness and fears. Frequent phone and electronic contact is also essential. Contact means, "I haven't left you. I'm still here for you."

- Give children ongoing assurances that they are not at fault, are loved, and that things will work out down the road. Once is not enough, even for older children.
- Play! Find ways to forget about the changes. Enjoy activities and each other. Find ways for everyone to relax and have fun together.



Two: Tell Me What To Expect

Children need to know what changes to expect and whenever possible have a say. Kids are calmed with information about how the adults will structure their lives: who drives and picks up at school, helps with homework, decides the parental terms for getting that driver's license. Implementing House and Safety rules, boundaries, routines, and family planners or calendars are essential to supporting a sense of security and a comforting rhythm to daily life. Structure feels safe. Life can and does go on.

Three: Be Willing to Tackle the Tougher Questions

Children find difficult to talk about some of the tougher personal issues possibly because some of these highlight uncharacteristic or immature behavior by the adults. Children wonder what they should do when parents need them to put on a happy face or expect them to choose sides. What can they say when a parent asks them private information about the other parent? What do they do when their parents snub each other at the soccer game or fight in the driveway? Do they have to like it when their parent snuggles up to a new love interest? What about when a parent breaks down crying and sobbing? Or, hearing two different versions, do they wonder

which parent is lying? For adults, these circumstances are trying. For children they can be confusing and disheartening even traumatic. Parents must consider how their actions and attitudes impact their child and know how to make mid-course corrections. Children want to believe their parents know what they are doing and that they can rely on them. It's easy for these tougher issues to adversely affect children. When parents initiate talks with their children and answer questions, they must walk a fine line. Explanations and assurances must be specific enough to be useful, but not so detailed that a child is drawn into the adult's experience or intimate details. Tough issues take time for adults to untangle. The first step is recognition that they exist and that they do impact the children.

Four: Help Kids Build Skills and Self-Confidence

Children have a right to learn how to help themselves. In workshops, groups, or one-on-one, children can learn how to use age-appropriate tools and skills for dealing with grief, managing feelings such as fear and anger, expressing needs in words, using different approaches to solve problems, resolve disagreements, and setting goals. Talk is not enough. For example, children can learn skills to deal with feeling panicky and fearful by taking slow breaths. They need help finding words to ask for something they need. They can learn to tell themselves, "This is between the grown-ups and not my problem." When adults take the time to help children solve divorce-specific problems or fears, they can also build bridges to stronger social skills and self-confidence that can serve children the rest of their lives. Older children especially can use their transition experiences to enhance a sense of control and mastery.

Some of the resources Dr. Ricci uses in her practice:

The CoParenting Toolkit: The inspiring new update to *Mom's House, Dad's House*, by Isolina Ricci, CCPS Publications, 2012.

Mom's House, Dad's House For Kids: Feeling at Home in One Home or Two, Isolina Ricci, Ph.D., Fireside/Simon and Schuster, 2006, (Read with parents, ages 7-10, Read alone, ages 10-18).

The Feelings Book: The Care & Keeping of Your Emotions, by Lynda Madison, illustrated by Norm Bendell, Reed Business Information, Inc., 2002 (Ages 9+).

My Mom and Dad Are Getting a Divorce, by Florence Bienenfeld, Authorhouse, 2002 (Ages 4-8).

More Things Parents Can Do

- Seek ways to incorporate all four keys for meeting children's needs. Incorporate Keys 1 and 2 as soon as possible.
- Find ways to strengthen skills as an authoritative parent, relating to the other parent, and ways to de-stress.
- Attend a workshop of six weeks or longer, with the child and the other parent if possible as noted below. Select a program with groups for children divided by age.
- Provide the child with counseling or an ongoing children's group if he or she appears to feel better with this type of support.
- Provide parents and children with books on family changes that answer questions but also impart a sense of order and structure. Choose books like *Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids* that will help the child build skills in problem solving, identifying and expressing needs and feelings, and ways to organize life between homes.
- Focus on strengthening a family team spirit with family projects and activities that are fun and that build skills and solidarity. Find ways in which these efforts will significantly contribute to the well being of the family and to one another.
- Have regular times, (bedtime, driving to school, or mealtimes) for open discussions about anything including how the changes are going.

Find Isolina Ricci's books at:
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