

# STEPHANIE SAYS



## Children and Divorce

Words: Stephanie Hefner

**D**ivorce is one of life's most stressful events. Whether you are relieved or devastated by your divorce, it is inevitable that your life is impacted by the changes of finances, living arrangements, schedules and establishing your new definition of family. That being said, it's no wonder most divorces involve conflict and are highly litigated. The litigation and court process in itself creates the mindset that there is going to be a winner, and there is going to be a loser. There is nothing worse for your children than being exposed to an emotionally fueled competition such as this. You can either be bitter, broken or better as a result of divorce; it's your choice. But the question becomes "How is YOUR CHOICE impacting YOUR CHILD?"

According to research, the number one factor that determines how well children function after divorce is...The Level of Conflict. There are amicable divorce cases where parents are working together despite their differences. This is called co-parenting, or cooperative parenting. Do these parents agree on everything? No! The difference is that cooperative parents are willing to negotiate and communicate in a way that is not harmful or uncomfortable for the children. These parents are able to put aside their own feelings or dislikes about each other, and make decisions based on an understanding of how their own behavior impacts their children. Just as divorce brings up fear and anxiety in adults, children experience the same emotions. Children will respond differently to separation and divorce depending on their age and other developmental factors, but one thing remains the same for all ages; they will have many questions and need your love and support more than ever. Experiencing difficult emotions through divorce is normal, however, it is important to be clear if you are handling it in a way that moves you and your children toward a healthy new way of living as a family. Or are you getting stuck in guilt, anger, bargaining or depression?

Here are some **Dos** and **Don'ts** to ensure you are creating an environment where you and your children can survive and thrive through divorce:

- **Do** reassure your children that you love them and will always be their mommy or daddy. The loss of their family as they have known it can create a fear of them losing you as a parent as they have known it.

- **Don't** engage in conflict in front of your children.

Everyone knows this, but the fact is this... many parents fight in front of their children despite knowing right from wrong. This shows a lack of self-control, and it creates unnecessary anxiety and fear for children.

- **Do** follow the parenting plan time-sharing agreement. The best process for everyone is to have a clear, consistent, and predictable schedule. Unless the relationship is friendly, stick to the schedule to avoid conflict or miscommunication.

- **Don't** talk badly about the other parent. Children see themselves as a part of the other parent, and if you degrade mom or dad, you are degrading a part of your child. Children interpret this message as "What's wrong with me if my mom or dad isn't a good person?" If there is a true side to be seen, then it will be seen someday.

- **Do** take care of yourself. Being present with your children and meeting their needs is difficult to do if you are suffering. Look for support from friends, family or a counselor if you are hungry for healing.

- **Don't** put the children in the middle. They are not messengers, schedulers, referees or mediators; they are children, and it is your responsibility to protect their childhood.

- **Do** look for signs of distress in your children. Look for changes in their mood, diet, behavior, sleep, grades, friendships and extra curricular interests. If you are concerned about any combination of these areas, then seek help from your pediatrician or a mental health professional.

Children are their best when they are free to love both parents. Children have the right to develop their own relationship with each parent. The family dynamics must shift to being less about the history of mom and dad's relationship, and more about the child's independent relationship with dad, and the child's independent relationship with mom.

If a parent continues to not cooperate, despite your best efforts, then let go. Don't engage and focus on your own behavior. Become the best parent you can be, and create a healthy foundation that your child can depend on. 🖐️

Stephanie Hefner, MA runs the Center for Counseling and Mediation Services. Contact: [Stephanie@CenterForCMS.com](mailto:Stephanie@CenterForCMS.com) or 941-957-8266, [www.CenterForCMS.com](http://www.CenterForCMS.com)