

What to Do for Your Children During Divorce

By Alison L. Patton

I write this section from the perspective of a professional who has worked with families going through divorce and also as a child of divorce. My parents divorced when I was seventeen. Speaking honestly, divorce is tough on kids. There is no sugar coating this. Nonetheless, divorce is a reality of life. If you are reading this website, you have made the decision to leave your marriage, or you are facing divorce because your spouse wants to take this step. Whatever the situation, you clearly care enough about your children to seek information about how to take care of them during the divorce. There is indeed a lot you can do to make the process easier for your children, and that's what this article is all about.

What I have learned from my experience – as an attorney and as a child of divorce – is that two unhappy parents staying together are not better than two happy divorced parents. My own parents have created very good lives for themselves post-divorce, and it was obvious to my siblings and I, even as young teens, that our parents were mismatched. I've seen the same positive results with clients, although it usually takes 2-3 years before everyone is completely back on their feet.

Give yourself and your children time and patience, and don't give up hope even when things seem to be falling apart. Divorce is a kind of death and there is the same grief process. You and your children will go through many stages – denial, anger, depression – before reaching acceptance. Your children will be able to move on if you can. Children want to see their parents happy, so the best thing you can do is figure out what you need to do to help yourself heal and move forward, and in the process, try to minimize the damage to them.

What you can do to minimize the impact

You can definitely minimize the impact of divorce on your children. There are five things you have control over every single day, so focus your time and energy on these challenges rather than spend time feeling guilty or caught up in blame. These factors will make a big difference in how your children fare in the short run and also in the long run. You will also find that the less toxic energy you put out to your children about the divorce, the more it will help you move forward as well.

The five factors you have control over are:

- **How you handle the divorce legally**

Ongoing litigation is generally much harder on the entire family than settling matters out of court and through mediation. Whenever possible, try to resolve your divorce

cooperatively and fairly. (After you've finished this article, go to [Free Info/Articles](#) for several articles on this topic.)

- **What you do for your children during and after the divorce to address their confusion and grief**

More on this topic at the end of the article.

- **How you behave around your children on a day-to-day basis**

Do your best to “keep it together” around them. It’s impossible to hide your sadness, but try to do the worst of your grieving and falling apart when the children aren’t there. Use your friends for your support system, not your kids. More on this topic below.

- **How you treat your ex-spouse around the kids**

Be civil to your ex-spouse when you have to see each other and try not to fight. If you can eventually get to the point where you can be friendly with one another, that will make it even easier on your kids. Kids pick up on tension between their parents and it is stressful and upsetting to them. Little kids find it very confusing when their parents are sniping at each other. More below on why this is so important.

- **Whether you bad mouth your ex-spouse to the children or to other people when the children can hear**

In a nutshell, don’t do it. This will mess up your kids as much as the fighting. Don’t lie or cover up for your ex, but don’t make it your job to point out all your ex’s failings to the kids. Be careful about talking negatively about your ex to others. Kids are often listening when we think they aren’t.

Long-term studies—both formal and informal—show that fighting between divorced parents causes the most damage to kids

Long-term formal studies have shown that ongoing conflict between divorced parents is the most damaging thing you can do to your children. In other words, if you really want to screw up your kids, keep fighting in front of them even after you have separated, and bad mouth your ex-spouse to your kids. Guaranteed, your kids will be in therapy and will have lifelong scars from the conflict. This is what formal studies have shown.

The anecdotal stories are the same. A few years ago, I spoke with a family law judge in San Diego who described a forum held in Los Angeles for family lawyers and judges. The forum had a panel of adults on the stage (in their 20s, 30s and 40s) whose parents had divorced when they

were children. These adults were invited to speak about their experiences. This is how the family law judge described what she saw:

- There were adults on the panel who were in good marriages and didn't seem to have difficulty having a healthy relationship with their spouse. They didn't seem to have substantial damage from their parents' divorce. It hadn't been easy, but they had been able to move on and were now leading normal adult lives.
- There were other adults on the panel who were still pretty "messed up" from their parents' divorce. They hadn't been able to form good love relationships in their life, weren't married or had been divorced many times themselves. They spoke with great bitterness about their parents' divorce and many still carried around anger and pain, even decades later. **One thing these adults had in common was their parents had a lot of ongoing conflict during and after the divorce.**

In other words, divorce in itself isn't going to destroy your children's future ability to be happy and form relationships. Fighting that goes on and on after divorce **will** damage your children and make it harder for them to have good relationships in the future.

The Day-to-Day Challenges: Stop fighting in front of the children, don't bad-mouth your spouse, and don't make your kids your confidant

- Is it normal to keep fighting even after separation? Yes.
- Is it normal to want to talk badly about your ex in front of the kids or to the kids? Yes.

Accept the fact that you aren't a saint and there will be times when you inadvertently get into conflict or say something in front of your kids. **What you must do, however, is make a pact with yourself that you will do your very best, every single day, to shield your kids from all conflict and to avoid bad-mouthing your ex to the kids.**

- This means having discussions and fights when the kids aren't there or in hearing range.
- This means setting up a custody/parenting situation so that you have as little face to face contact with your ex-spouse if there is tendency for things to get ugly when you see each other. For example, arrange it so that your spouse picks up or drops off the kids at school rather than at your house as part of the parenting plan so you see each other minimally.

- This means making an agreement with your ex-spouse that you will use email for the majority of communication if you keep having unexpected blow-ups when you try to talk in person or over the phone.

The second very important challenge is this: Do not treat your kids as friends and confidants.

Even if they are teenagers and act like confidants, do not share with them the details of the divorce or your emotions and feelings about your ex-spouse. Save it for your best friend or therapist. If your spouse had an affair, this is not something your children need to know right now. They will learn about it when they are older and will probably have to get some therapy to help them forgive this parent in the future.

Sometimes kids will want to know what's going on and will hound you—almost as if they are looking for a reason to be mad at the other parent. It is your job to be the adult and not talk about it with them. Tell them: “This is between Dad (or Mom) and me, and I don't want you to be involved because we both love you and it's not good for you to take sides.” Assure them that you and their dad (or mom) will be able to resolve the conflict.

Your children might argue back and say it involves them and they have a right to know, but deep down—when you refuse to drag them into it— it will be a relief for them. They do not need to be responsible for adult business and emotions. When kids are used as confidants by their parents, they feel responsible and it mixes up the role of parent/child. It also damages their relationship with their other parent. It may be superficially satisfying to have your child take your side and reject their other parent, but this is wrong to do to your child. You are using your child as a pawn, it is going to cause them emotional harm and it is terribly confusing for them even if they don't show it.

The reason I stress this point is that I've seen this happen so many times in my practice, even from good parents. Divorce makes parents feel alone, angry and depressed. It is normal to want to turn to your children for support—particularly your older children. Sometimes adolescents do a great job of hiding their feelings. They will tell you they are fine with the divorce, they support your decision, they agree that “dad (or mom) is a jerk for cheating on you or leaving you,” and so on and so forth—making it seem like it is okay to share details with them and use them as a sounding board. Don't believe everything they say.

I've seen children of divorce wake up one day in their twenties or thirties and realize they have a huge amount of grief, anger and regret about their parents' divorce, but they were never allowed to feel this because they were too busy trying to support their mom (or dad) as a confidant. In other words, they stuffed their feelings the whole time their parents were getting divorced out of love for one parent (or both). If you can shield them from the fighting and resist the urge to make them your confidant, your children will thank you one day (and guaranteed, they will be much healthier and happier adults).

What to do for your children during divorce to address their confusion and grief

This is an important topic so I posted a separate article called **Resources for Children**. You can find that article by going to the **Free Articles/Info** section of my website, <http://www.alisonpattonlaw.com> .

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