

DIVORCE AND CO-PARENTING

by Rebecca A. Stanwyck, LCSW

May 2008

If you're recently divorced, or facing the prospect of divorce, and you have children, my heart goes out to you. You're not just dealing with one of the most challenging life events that a person can ever experience, but the degree of difficulty is multiplied by the number of kids involved. And in my experience, the guilt is multiplied as well.

Most parents' biggest fear is that the divorce will cause the children irreparable harm. After all, even if you didn't choose to have this happen to you, you're an adult and you'll figure out how to cope. But the kids are innocent bystanders – it doesn't seem fair, does it?

Take heart – the end of a marriage doesn't have to mean the end of the family. **It is entirely possible to continue to be good parents who raise healthy, happy kids despite the rift in your relationship.** In fact, I know of many, many couples who have done so.

What about all of the books and research indicating that children of divorce suffer long-lasting psychological damage? Actually, in Judith Wallerstein's famous 10-year study of families going through divorce, 45% of the children did not experience any long-term problems – vs. 41% who did (and 14% “not sure”). It seems it's not the divorce itself that's so traumatizing to kids, but rather how the parents act, before, during and after, that makes the difference.

The research shows that **children fare best after divorce when they are shielded from conflict, and cared for by both parents.** When children go into a divorce psychologically OK, they'll come through it OK, too. The key to a good outcome lies with you – and your ex. **How well you handle the divorce transition, and your own emotions, will affect your children far more than the divorce itself.**

Whatever feelings you may have toward your ex, you aren't going to be able to simply “X” him or her out of your life and move on. You'll remain connected to this person for the rest of your life, because of the children you share. Some divorced couples actually end up being friends, but if that seems impossible, then try to regard each other as business partners who are forming a limited partnership for the purpose of raising your children.

So don't badmouth your ex or argue in front of your child(ren), no matter how hurt or angry you may be. Don't confide in your child about what went wrong in your marriage, or put them in the middle by asking them to choose sides – they have the right to love both of you.

Do maintain a child's familiar environment and routine as much as possible. Tell them clearly and often: “It's not your fault” and “you still have two parents who love you.” Create transition rituals to make it easier for them to go back and forth between you. The best custody arrangements allow for flexibility to accommodate business trips, or visits from grandparents.

For more “Do's and Don'ts”, a good book is *“Vicky Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents”*. There are other helpful books, and I also highly recommend counseling – I've helped many divorced or divorcing parents improve their co-parenting relationship, even when they're barely speaking.