

quick tips for divorced parents

Divorce, even under the most amicable of circumstances, represents a trauma for the family system, impacting not only the couple, but all members of the family. Many parents in therapy quite aptly describe their experience of divorce as a kind of death. It is a loss of shared dreams and goals as well as a loss of the third “person” in your partnership that was the partnership itself. It’s a safe bet that most of us do not get married with any intention of divorce; as such, and because of the traumatic impact of divorce on all family members, there is likely no such thing as an easy divorce. But couples can aspire to a good divorce by managing the process and its outcomes consciously and compassionately. The following tips for managing divorce can help mitigate the trauma that you and your children experience. As you pursue a good divorce, it might be helpful to remember that:

The vast majority of children with divorced parents and/or stepfamilies develop into competent individuals well within the normal range on all measures of adjustment (Kelly, 2007).

FAMILY EVENTS

As a divorcing parent, it’s important to think through the reality that—especially when children are involved—a divorce changes, but doesn’t end, your relationship with your heretofore spouse. How will you, as divorced parents, manage future weddings, graduations, and holidays with your children?

As you think through the implications of a changed relationship, it is important to find ways to foster hope for a positive parenting experience. If you have been divorced for some time, remember that it is never too late to improve your relationship with your ex spouse and create a good divorce (Ahrons 2006). It is vital for both parents to look at potential power struggles with their former spouse and the potential this creates for painful loyalty conflicts in your children.

This kind of rational forethought and planning is incredibly difficult to achieve in the throes of a painful divorces. It is, therefore, most important to create a supportive network of friends and family, as well as to engage the services of a therapist who can give you objective, third party advice and support.

DIVORCED FATHERS

Research reveals that divorce has more of a tendency to negatively impact the fathers’ relationships with his children than the mothers’. Fathers who pursue role models for positive post-divorce parenting along with parent coaching have been shown to have more positive relationships with their children than those who do not engage these opportunities (Athrons 2006). Fathers do well to pursue parenting support in the form of therapy, groups, parenting programs, and friendships with other single or divorced fathers whom they respect.

DIVORCED MOTHERS

It has been shown that divorce has less of an impact on the relationship between mothers and their children. It is, however, important for a divorced mother to know that the quality of her relationships with her children is profoundly impacted by the quality of her relationship with her children's father. Mothers better serve their children and improve their own parenting relationships when they honor their children's need for a continued relationship with their father (Ahrons, 2006).

Generally speaking, the better your child's relationship with your former spouse, the better your parenting relationships, and your children, will be.

PARENTAL CONFLICT

Continued parental sparring not only impacts your relationship with your children, but it also negatively impacts your children's relationships with extended family and family friends. Children often feel the need to choose sides in an attempt to create or maintain consistency and predictability in their environment. Good divorces are those in which the children can comfortably maintain relationships with both parents and their extended kin networks (Akron, 2006). It has been theorized that conflict among divorced parents threatens a child's emotional security by causing them to worry that their parents will no longer care for them (Fabricius & Luecken 2007). We are becoming more aware that conflict between former spouses has a significant impact on the long term health of their children. The lack of emotional security that this causes has been shown to create dysregulation in the child's physiological stress response, promoting pathology in the brain and body (McEwen & Wingfield, 2003).

Frequently, conflict among divorced parents stems from difficulty letting go of old resentments. Ex spouses sometimes resist letting go of anger, pain, or hurt for fear of invalidating their own pain and allowing their ex-spouse off the hook for the pain they have caused. Revenge is sometimes used to produce the feeling of mastery that comes from moving from a passive to an active position, thus enhancing self-esteem (Bernstein, 2007). In addition, research has shown that maintaining anger toward the other parent can be a strategy to ward off depression and grief. These strategies are usually short sighted, however, and can perpetuate dysfunction in the family system. It is vital to your child's emotional and physical well-being, therefore, that parents resolve old resentments towards their ex spouse.

WHEN PARENTS REMARRY

It is vital that parents and children understand and engage the challenges that remarriages and family blending can create. Developing realistic expectations for these new relationships is critical (Akron, 2006). Divorced families and blended families are forced to rethink and re-conceptualize what a family is. It is often an idealized pre-divorce view of family that sets parents and children up for failure and unhealthy expectations.

Each family member has a separate and important opinion and perception of the divorce. It is vital to create space for every family member's perception rather than projecting one's own views onto the children. Often the child's voice is smothered—especially during very difficult divorces. Allowing, hearing, and validating your child's experience can increase positive outcomes in coping with divorce.

Finally, it is important to empower children in divorce situations; children who see themselves as victims in a divorce situation can struggle more than those who do not. Language that promotes the notion that they are victims or damaged goods is best avoided, as should labels that anthologize divorce, such as ACOD (Adult Children of Divorce). This type of language can send a message to children that they are victims (Bernstein, 2007).

Remember, it is the parents' behavior in response to divorce, rather than the divorce itself, that has the greatest and most long-term impact on children.

SOURCES

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