

Making Divorce Better for Children

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There is no denying that divorce is a traumatic event for most families, but especially children. Kids are so vulnerable at this time because they typically have little to no control over their circumstances or their parent's decisions and are therefore often left feeling both hopeless and powerless. Fortunately there has been quite a lot of research done on the effects of divorce on families over the past 30 years which has shed some light on how to better protect children from the negative affects of separation or divorce. This has given rise to a new type of counseling within the psychotherapeutic community, known as **coparent counseling**, which is aimed at helping parents learn to cooperate more effectively in the aftermath of separation or divorce.

As a psychotherapist who specializes in divorce-related counseling I have compiled a list of tips and suggestions, gleaned from research within the field as well as my own clinical experience, which parents who are separating or divorcing have found very helpful. While each family's situation is unique the following advice has stood the test of time. If you or someone you know is going through or has gone through a separation or divorce I highly recommend familiarizing yourself with the following points;

1. ***Frequently remind your children that the divorce was not their fault in any way and that you, as their parent, will always love them and remain a part of their lives (unless, of course, this is not true).*** Kids, especially young children, often attribute their parent's divorce to something they themselves did or said and can therefore blame themselves for what is happening to the family. They need to be reassured of the fact that the divorce was their parent's decision and that it does not mean the end of their relationship with either parent. I advise parents to remind their younger children (under the age of 8) of this fact often, especially if their children seem to have difficulty adjusting to the separation or divorce.

2. ***Learn to view your current relationship with your ex-partner as a business-like, co-parent relationship that focuses only on matters directly involved with the ongoing rearing of the children. Refrain from speaking about any other personal matters.*** Many parents catch on to this suggestion right away and naturally develop a good working relationship with their ex. These are people who can often maintain a friendship after their marriage or intimate relationship is over. However, these are not the parents who are typically seen for counseling. I explain to all parents that one of the objectives of co-parent counseling is to help them convert their previous personal relationship into one whose only focus is on their children. One of the best ways of accomplishing this goal is to limit communication to issues directly involved with the children and to learn how not to "drift" into personal matters. This helps parents establish

and maintain good healthy boundaries with one another that tend to promote safety and trust.

3. *Always communicate about matters involving the children directly with the other parent and never use any child as a “go-between.” Asking children to deliver messages to the other parent, however innocuous these messages might appear, can generate tremendous anxiety for children, especially if conflict already exists or has existed between the parents.* This is one of the most common errors that parents make, often without realizing the destructive consequences to their children. When there is conflict between parents children catch on very quickly that delivering messages back and forth between them can result in the “kill the messenger” syndrome. Even relatively simple messages such as *“tell your mother/father I’ll be a half hour late to pick you up on Saturday”* can produce a lot of stress for kids, as they may have previously experienced the other parent’s anger or mood change as the result of delivering such a message. It is simply not fair to children to put them in this position.
4. *Never speak disparagingly about the other parent to the children as this causes a loyalty conflict within a child that will ultimately come back to haunt the parent making the remarks.* This is an obvious truism that parents sometimes find difficult to honor. While each parent may have a negative impression or opinion of the other parent, nevertheless, it is inexcusable to attempt to corrupt any child’s relationship with the other parent. Both parent’s relationship should be fully supported by each parent unless, of course, there are specific reasons not to do so. It greatly benefits children to feel that it is OK for them to love both parents without fearing they will lose support from either parent if they do.
5. *Learn to convert your complaints of the other parent into requests for behavioral change from that parent. Beginning requests by using phrases such as, “Would you be willing to”, “I’m wondering if it is possible for you to” or “I’m hopeful that you are willing/able to”, etc..., demonstrates both respect and politeness to the other parent, which will go a long way toward establishing cooperation and softening anticipated resistance.* When conflict persists between parents it is often the case that one or both people become “problem-focused” and not “solution-oriented.” At this point frustration and mistrust are the most common feelings that each parent has for the other and rarely are parents able to cooperate well enough to engage in problem solving about issues concerning their children. Learning to identify solutions to problems and then proposing them as requests of the other parent is one of the best ways to diffuse power struggles between parents.
6. *Never engage in conflict with the other parent in front of the children. Keep all communication with the other parent business-like and positive or, at the very least, neutrally toned.* Again, this advice is very obvious but often difficult

to put into practice for many parents who have a history of conflict with their ex partner or spouse.

7. *When conflicts occur between parents that involve the children, learn to focus on the facts surrounding the actual problems as reported by the children (using their exact words as much as possible), rather than editorializing or exaggerating the events for dramatic effect.* In my clinical experience this advice seems to be somewhat difficult for parents to understand, let alone put into practice. My guess is that most parents simply don't pay as close attention as they should to what their children are actually trying to communicate in order to be as fully informed about any situation prior to approaching the other parent. Quoting a child's exact words can help prevent distortions and misunderstanding.
8. *Don't involve your children in your new personal, intimate relationships unless you are certain that the relationship is a committed one that will become an important and integral part of the children's lives. Casual dating and/or temporary, non-committed relationships should be kept separate from the children and enjoyed during the parent's own time.* All children need to feel supported by both parents after a separation or divorce. If either parent has begun a new relationship too quickly and exposed the children to a new boyfriend or girlfriend then there is the likelihood that any child will feel both jealous and threatened by that parent's new relationship. In general children need time to adjust to the breakup of the family before being asked to adjust to new people in their lives.

Bruce L. Ross is a licensed marriage and family counselor in private practice in Santa Cruz, CA. Bruce's practice specializes in divorce-related counseling including; child custody mediation, couples counseling, relationship clarification counseling, blended family counseling and coparent counseling. To reach Bruce for questions or to schedule an appointment please call 831.459.9329 or visit his website – santacruzfamilycounseling.com