

Caught in The Middle

Children shouldn't be casualties of divorce.

By Mike McCurley

The agony of divorce is overwhelming, but most people are able to bounce back after their divorce. The same is not true for many children. The more we learn about divorce and its effect on our society, the more we recognize the long-term, pervasive consequences on children -- the least equipped to handle the negative effects.

In her groundbreaking study of family members 25 years after divorce, family researcher and psychologist Judith Wallerstein found that children of divorce are less educated, had higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse, and had a lower economic status than their peers -- even their own parents. They were also less likely to marry than other children in their own age group.

The economic consequences of divorce are well known. Research shows that children's economic well-being plummets after divorce, in part from child support delinquency, and in part from a lower household income.

In a perfect world, the answer to these ills would be to end divorce. True, there are ways to reduce the divorce rate and theories abound on how to do that, including abolishing no-fault divorce, implementing mandatory pre-marital counseling, and instituting longer waiting periods before divorces can be granted.

The sad reality, however, is that some divorces are inevitable. Yet, they need not take such a toll on our children. When ex-spouses are at war, the chief casualties are their kids. Steamed that your ex-wife has a new boyfriend? Withhold child support. Irritated that your ex-husband insists on seeing the kids on the weekend you had planned a special outing? Spew out a trail of obscenities about their other parent. Bad ideas.

The key to protecting the children of divorce is convincing parents to step back from their own anger and see what is really at stake. It isn't their pride. It isn't their home. It isn't even a few thousand bucks. What's really at stake is the long-term well-being of their children.

Thus, two people who find it difficult to be in the same room without screaming at each other must learn to calmly, deliberately, and most of all, lovingly, make joint decisions about their children's well-being.

Fortunately, help to diffuse the anger felt in a divorce is available. Many jurisdictions have public or private parent education programs that can help divorcing couples work through their anger. Better still, many qualified family therapists make their living by assisting such families in crises.

If you're a divorcing parent, and one of those options is outside your financial or geographic reach, look to your family, church, or other social organization for help. Divorce support groups can also be a tremendous help (see "Divorce Support

Services" on page 28). Many helpful books have been written on the subject. Although it's far from the panacea that its proponents claim, mediation can also be a helpful aid in resolving bitter disputes. For help finding dispute resolution resources, contact your local family services agency, or your local Bar Association.

Divorcing parents, however, aren't the only ones responsible for helping the children of divorce. We all bear responsibility: lawyers, judges, grandparents, friends, and bosses. If you know someone who is in the midst of a divorce, remember that an understanding ear and a sincere offer to help can do much to diffuse the anger and frustration many divorcing people feel.

It would be easier to ignore the problems of divorce, but the stakes are too high, and our children are certainly worth the extra effort.

Ten Tips for Divorcing Parents

Divorce is never easy on kids, but there are many ways parents can help lessen the impact of their break-up on their children:

1. Never disparage your former spouse in front of your children. Children know they are "part mom" and "part dad," and the criticism can batter the child's self-esteem.
2. Don't use your children as messengers. The less the children feel a part of their parents' battle, the better.
3. Reassure your children that they're loved and that the divorce isn't their fault. Many children assume that they're to blame for their parents' hostility.
4. Encourage your children to see your former spouse frequently. Do everything within your power to accommodate the visitation.
5. At every step during your divorce, remind yourself that your children's interests -- not yours -- are paramount, and act accordingly. Lavish them with love at each opportunity.
6. Your children may be tempted to act as your caretaker. Resist the temptation to let them. Let your peers, adult family members, and mental health professionals be your counselors. Let your children be children.
7. If you have a drinking or drug problem, get counseling right away. An impairment inhibits your ability to reassure your children and give them the attention they need.
8. If you are the non-custodial parent, pay your child support. The loss of income after divorce puts children at a financial disadvantage, can effect them for the rest of their lives.
9. If you're the custodial parent and not receiving child support, don't tell your children. It feeds into the child's sense of abandonment and further erodes his or her stability.
10. If possible, don't uproot your children. A stable residence and school life helps buffer children from the trauma of their parents' divorce.

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