

Reducing Divorce Conflict for the Sake of Your Child

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There's been a great deal of publicity lately about the negative impact of divorce on children. This research, by Dr. Judith Wallerstein, has highlighted a small group of children who have shown ongoing problems many years after the divorce of their parents. She indicates that children of divorce are at higher risks than children who grow up in non-divorced homes. While there is a statistical difference between the continued functioning of these children, research suggests that the majority of all children adjust reasonably well and have few problems in life.

However, it's the children exposed to conflict, both in marriage and after divorce, that experience some of the most significant problems. If you continue fighting after your divorce, your children will become disillusioned and disgusted. When parents divorce, children at least hope the fighting will go away so that they can get some peace in their life. Many times I have heard children say that they wouldn't mind the divorce so much if their parents would finally learn to get along better. After the divorce, all children really want is for their parents to act grown up, leave them in peace, and let them love the other parent. Instead, when conflicts worsen, children are left with many wounds.

These wounds and prolonged frustration can include feelings of disillusionment, fear, insecurity, vulnerability, and other such emotions. Children develop loyalty conflicts and become afraid to love both of their parents or to express their love for one parent in front of the other parent. Many of these children become aligned with only one parent so they become less anxious and insecure. This is a factor in alienated children, those children who feel that they can't have a relationship with both parents because they can't handle the stress. Divorced children frequently feel that they have failed or blame themselves when their parents stay in conflict, and they feel even more insecure when they can't prevent the arguments.

At its worst, children experiencing intense conflict have to take sides because they can't manage the internal tension and anxiety they feel. For these children, there is a risk of serious psychological regression where they will see one parent as mostly bad and the other parent as mostly good. This psychological "splitting", as it is called, is damaging to children because it reinforces a style in which they view the world in a "black and white" or "all or nothing" way rather than a more balanced view of good and bad in most people.

My experience is that psychological splitting is the most destructive emotional symptom which children might experience as a result of their parents' conflict because of the way it creates more confusion and anxiety in the children. Behaviorally, children are likely to

express their wounds with regression, aggression, withdrawal, or depression. They show signs of increased insecurity around the transition between homes, they worry, and they may be reluctant to express affection. They may feel embarrassed, daydream a lot, and have trouble in school. They are likely to feel responsible for your conflicts, and be more edgy emotionally. They might become clingy with one or both of you. In young children, signs of regression can include bed wetting and temper tantrums. School-age children often have difficulty with their school work or they might have fights with peers and become behavior problems in the classroom. By the time a child reaches adolescence, these children are at risk of expressing their wounds with rebelliousness, substance abuse, sexual acting out, and other serious or self-destructive behaviors.

While it is common for parents to blame the other when these symptoms erupt, it is important to recognize that you also are likely to play a role in these difficulties. You need to recognize that both your obvious and not-so-obvious behaviors are likely to be pressuring your children and causing them to feel this way. Blaming and being critical of the other parent are things that make your children feel and act worse. It is critical that you look inward toward yourself and improve your communication with the other parent and your children, to reduce your role in the conflict, and to ease your child's transition between homes so that they can be free of the tension which this conflict causes. If you can work toward those goals, your children are likely to experience fewer problems and will hopefully make a healthier adjustment to your divorce.

In order to parent more effectively after divorce, regardless of the amount of time you have your children, you can reduce the exposure of this conflict first by understanding your level of conflict. Dr. Constance Ahrons has suggested that there are four different types of post-divorce parenting relationships. If you can be "Parenting Pals", you will interact with each other with ease, generally cooperate with one another, and stay focused on your child and his needs without much conflict. If you are "Cooperative Colleagues", you will meet in business-like ways to discuss your child and her needs, be flexible with one another, and have empathy for your ex-spouse and your child. With either of these styles, you will coparent your child effectively, with little help necessary from others.

In contrast, if you are "Angry Associates", you will probably need some type of parent education which will guide you to better understand your child and his needs. You might do better with less contact with your ex-spouse, instead engaging in parallel parenting, in which each of you do the best job of parenting regardless of your feelings toward your ex-spouse. Try and develop a structured parenting plan and use that plan to guide your behaviors. If necessary, use mediation to settle your disputes. Finally, if you are "Fiery Foes", you'll want to avoid all direct communication, except for emergency situations. Use a "parenting book to pass back and forth between you while you manage your day-to-day parenting of your child. Avoid face-to-face confrontations at the exchange of your child. Instead, try to use a neutral place, such as your child's school or day-care center. Use fax or email for day-to-day communications, and make sure those communications are neither

hostile or blaming. You might need to use a coparent counselor or court-ordered parent coordinator to help solve ongoing disputes.

Regardless of your parenting style, you'll want to work to reduce level of conflict, trying to move from a more conflicted style to a less conflicted one. Finally, regardless of your ex-spouse, you'll want to do the best job of parenting possible, always taking the high road for the benefit of your child.

More information on these topics, and help in dealing with difficult ex-spouses, can be found in Dr. Stahl's book, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs*, Impact Publishers: San Luis Obispo, CA (2000).

References

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