

Kids, Conflict, and Divorce

First and foremost, you need to care more about your children than your desire to *win* against your former partner. The research is clear that kids in high conflict divorces react to the relationship challenges between their parents in very distinct ways.

- ❖ Some youngsters *act out* (drugs, sex, runaway, pregnancy & delinquency).
- ❖ Others *turn inward* (isolation, internal conflicts, depression, & sometimes suicide).
- ❖ Many kids develop long-term *interpersonal conflicts* (fights, arguments' & rage) that parallel the conflict between their divorced parents.
- ❖ Many other children and teens develop *problems with thinking* (judgment, poor grades & dropping out). The cognitive difficulties develop as a result of the stress hormones in the brain that are present in high conflict divorces.



You have a clear choice about your son or daughters emotional well-being.

A Few Suggestions:

*** Nurture & set limits.** Effective parenting requires both boundaries and affection. Some parents are naturally better at setting limits, providing discipline, and encouraging responsibility, while others are better at showing affection, establishing an emotionally warm environment, and encouraging a sense of safety. Effective parenting really requires both. Take a good look at what you're good at and what you can do to be even better.

*** Discipline your child on your time.** Unless you've made an agreement to uphold each other's discipline, don't expect that your former partner will uphold a consequence that you've instituted for misconduct. On the other hand, if your son or daughter has just been picked up for shoplifting, a trip to Disneyland isn't a great idea. If it is possible for you to support each other in discipline, go for it, but be certain that the consequences are considered reasonable by both parents. If a stepparent (or significant other) is present in the home, birth parents are most often in the best position to provide boundaries and consequences.

*** Communicate, be dependable, be responsible.** Determine the best way to communicate with your former partner - consider the phone, texting, email, etc. Keep the lines of communication open. If there are changes in your plans for your time with the children, communicate with your ex and the children giving them as much advanced notice as possible. Let your ex know about school events, medical appointments, or other activities in your child's life. Be on time with child support and for scheduled pickups and drop-offs. Return the kids in clean clothing and be certain that homework is complete.

*** Be considerate.** Speak to your former partner in a fully respectful manner. If words like "crazy" or "sick" are used to describe your former partner, you'll limit your ability to co-parent and will likely compromise your relationship with your child. Be certain to call before coming to your former partner's home and never come unannounced.

*** When you disagree** with your former partner, share your concerns out of earshot of your children. If the discussion is apt to be heated, walk away rather than have a verbal fight in front of your son or daughter. Parental anger is toxic for kids!

*** Plan extra-curricular activities with your ex in mind.** We can't let kids get caught in the middle of parent's planning of extra-curricular sports or recreation. Be certain that you are both on the same page whether it's tennis lessons, a personal trainer, or summer camp. Work to insure that the time commitments and finances are worked out prior to registration for the event.

* **Be kind to your ex-partner's new partner.** Kids need love and limits, and often benefit from the support of new stepmother or mom's new boyfriend. Be open to the possibility that these new people in your son or daughter's life can provide useful support. Watch out for your own jealousy and understand that no one can replace your role as mom or dad. Having a positive relationship with your ex's new partner can be enormously useful. Having an extra set of eyes on kids as they go through their teen years may be especially valuable.

* **Spending time and making it fun.** Chances are that you're very busy engaged in parenting, especially if you're now a single-parent. We hope that you're going to get really good at multi-tasking because there's a lot to get done. While you're at it, think about how you're going to have some fun with the children. It's hardly a secret that the kids who are most deeply engaged in fun activities with their parents are usually those who report the closest affectional bonds. Go on hikes, play in the pool together, go for walks with the dog, watch movies, play board games, have pillow fight, joke around, plan a vacation together, and laugh a lot!

* **Get up to speed, moms and dads** It's risky making judgements about the parenting skill set of the *typical* mother or father, but both dads and moms often struggle in more than a few ways that matter to the kids after a divorce. Many dads struggle with tasks that their ex-wives have handled nicely including household jobs (cooking & cleaning), planning a play date, getting the homework done, managing appointments, and insuring that baths and bedtimes happen. Some moms may not be as adept at dealing with a plumbing problem, rotating the cars tires or coaching t-ball. Typically one or the other dealt with household finances and handling the tax bill is a post-divorce mystery to many parents. We suggest getting some advice from a trusted friend who may be able to help you develop the skills that will promote success.



* **Take a careful look at yourself, PLEASE!** Problems in marriages are often transferred to the kids after a divorce. Sometimes divorces happen when one or both partners have problems that they failed to address (substance abuse, rage, irresponsibility), sometimes the divorce is about challenges that are *between* the partners (communication, different values, cultural issues), and sometimes it is a combination of both. The same problems that hurt the marriage are apt to hurt the children when the kids become the only *joint* between the two parties. It may be hard to admit to your own difficulties, but it will be harder to address the resulting legal, psychiatric, vocational, and educational problems if you don't. Take responsibility for your own life and the decisions that you make. It is tempting to point the finger of blame at the other parent, but it isn't helpful. We each must be 100% responsible for our lives and decisions.

* **Don't try to pull the child onto your side.** Most children feel a connection to both parents and are especially concerned that they will be loved by both parents after a divorce. Too many parents want to insure that they continue receiving a large part of their child's affection and try to insure this with comments and actions designed to alienate their ex-partner from the children. This strategy very often backfires when the child ultimately recognizes the alienating strategy and distances themselves from the parent who has done this. Far too often, both parents use bribes, comments, hurtful behaviors, and legal roadblocks to create emotional distance between the child and the other parent. The result of this is often a variety of psychiatric conditions, delinquency, depression, school failure, and drug abuse. It is rarely (if ever) a good idea to show the kids court documents, especially if those documents will cast a dark shadow on either parent.

* **Monitor your frustration.** If a conversation with your ex-partner becomes difficult, consider taking a step back, speak more deliberately, lower the volume, and consider postponing the discussion. Avoid arguments in front of the kids - even on the phone. Please, never touch your former partner.

* **Child & adolescent management can be TOUGH!** If the kids don't seem to listen and discipline is a problem, a class in parenting may provide useful skills. To the extent that it's possible, having the same rules and expectations at both houses is a great idea if you can work this out, but this obviously requires some communication and mutual respect.

* **Deal with the Loss.** All divorces are about loss: loss of relationship, finances, hopes, homes, and dreams. High conflict divorces often center on the fears and frustration of losing power, losing a bond with the children, losing an ability to be in control of the future, and losing self-esteem. Here is the paradox. We gain power in working cooperatively. The future is more assured and *safer* when we cooperate rather than conflict.

*** You *might* ask, but don't interrogate.** Kids hate it when they think that a parent is pumping them for information after they return from a visit - you will likely damage your relationship with your child if they feel pressured to be a 'spy' for you. Being positive about the events that your child enjoyed with their other parent will help you and your child.

*** Speak positively about your former partner.** From an early age, young people hear comments like "you have your mother's eyes" or "your musical talent comes from your father." Kids understand that they are a product of their mom and dad and that they have traits of both of their parents. After a divorce when kids hear comments like, "Your mother is a lazy tramp" or "I can't believe that I ever married that jerk," they also perceive that they may have those same traits because they are "half of their mom and half of dad." Solution: you are most kind to your child when focus on the positive in your ex. Saying terrible things about your former partner is the surest way to seriously hurt your child's self-esteem **and** compromise **your** relationship with your child. Saying respectful things is more likely to build rapport with your former partner, boost the kids' self-esteem, and make life feel *safer* for your kid.

*** Think about the impact of your decisions on your kids and former-partner.** Schedule events on your time and negotiate with your former partner on your interest in activities that cross over between both parents. Be certain that the child (or children) is ready to go, in clean clothing when due for a pick up. Avoid discussions of money or other "business" matters at the time of pick-up and please avoid using the children as messengers to your former partner.



*** Take a "businesslike" approach to dealing with your former partner.** We *get* the idea that you got a divorce because you were not a great fit, but your children's well-being demands that you get along well enough that the kids are not hurt. Adopt a stance where you deal with "just the facts" and not let old emotions control the present situation. Look for win-win compromises that are best for the children even if you sometimes feel like you are giving more than your fair share. You can bet that your former partner sometimes perceives that the result is not perfectly fair for them either.

*** If and when you start to date,** recognize that your daughter or son's security may become threatened. Be sensitive to their anxiety, fear, or anger and be ready to talk about it. Early teens may be especially sensitive about your intimacy - proceed with caution. It is often better to wait for a stable and serious relationship before introducing them to the kids.

*** Use a parenting coordinator or mediator** if you can't amicably work with your ex-partner to address the differences between the two of you. There is a cost to work with a PC or mediator, but it is typically far less than the expense of multiple court appearances and far less expensive than the damage to your daughter or son if the challenges continue.

*** Do your best to avoid court.** While Family Courts work to operate in the "*best interest of the children*," the legal process is adversarial and sometimes appears to be more designed to identify winners and loser than amicable resolutions. A judge who sees multiple cases each day simply cannot understand the complexities of each family who comes before them. The security and emotional stability of the children are often threatened when a child knows that their parents are about to go to battle in court. Kids very very often pick up on the tension in their parents when a court date approaches and they *know* (rightly or wrongly) that they are at the epicenter of the conflict.