

Helping your Kids Through Your Divorce

By Michael Becker

Life can get pretty crazy during a divorce, especially for your children. In some ways, your crisis becomes theirs. It's not unusual for kids to ask themselves (and sometimes you) things like, "How can I stop this from happening?" or "What did I do to cause this?" They may also worry that they won't see both parents in the future, or that they'll be split from their siblings. So what can you do to provide comfort at a tough time?

The good news is that – with some work on your part – your children can get through your divorce in fine shape. The most important factor affecting their adjustment is what you do. So it's in your hands.

It's really important to convey lots of unconditional love and support. Let your kids know that you both love them (even if you don't care for each other), and that they aren't responsible for what's happening. Following are specific steps you can take – with or without your 'ex' – to provide a safe landing for your children.

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Tell Them It's Not Their Fault

Kids of all ages often feel that they caused your divorce. They may feel responsible for your fights, especially if some of your disagreements centered on child rearing. Or they may say to themselves, "If I had just gotten better grades, been more obedient – or never had been born – this wouldn't be happening."

This is a tremendous burden for any child to bear, and it's your responsibility to relieve them of it. So tell your children, directly and repeatedly, that it was not their fault. They had nothing to do with it, period. Rather, the divorce happened because their

parents just couldn't get along. It would have been no different if the kids had not been around or had behaved differently.

Make A Real Effort to Get Through to Them

Children often say that it's hard for them to talk about something so heartbreaking as their parents' divorce. But at other times they may very much want to talk about their feelings. When you ask about how they're doing, however, they sometimes say things like, "Okay," "Fine," or just nothing at all. But you know there's more to the story.

The key is to avoid general questions, such as "How are you doing?" Rather, ask more specific questions, such as "How are you feeling about Dad's having moved out?" or "Are you worried that your mom and I will put you in the middle of our disagreements?" The more specific the question, the more likely it is to spur the conversation kids say they crave. And once your child begins to talk - and this may take repeated efforts – listen.

Don't Use Them as Your Confidants

It's tempting to tell your children your problems, especially about your divorce. They know all the people involved, are familiar with the issues, and probably have heard the arguments. And they're usually around.

Never, never, never do this. It's asking them to act as your parent or friend, which they're clearly not equipped to do. And, your kids can't possibly solve your problems. And when they can't help, their feelings of self-doubt and self-blame become more intense.

Give Them Unconditional Love

Almost uniformly, children say they need unconditional love from their parents – even more than money or possessions. That's love and caring with no strings attached. And they really need this when their parents are getting a divorce.

They need your love because divorce is sometimes viewed as a failure. So, the reasoning goes, there must be something wrong, or even defective, with at least one parent to have caused this failure. And if so, kids often think there's probably something wrong with them too – since they came from their parents. Your love for them reassures them that they're okay.

What this means in real life is to love your kids just because they exist. Specifically, tell them that you love them, and be active in their lives and supportive of their endeavors. Let them know – through your words and actions – that even though their parents can't love each other anymore, they can and do love their children.

Let Them Have Both Parents

Remember that you and your ex got divorced. Neither of you divorced your kids. Though hard to do at times, responsible parents put their own issues aside, and encourage their children to have as much contact as possible with the other parent.

You can encourage connection in lots of ways. The most obvious is by encouraging your children to spend direct time with their other parent. Try to make sure that this time occurs regularly, so you can plan and your children can count on it. And remember that it is not enough to just 'stand it,' or grudgingly permit access.

When parents live far apart from each other, try other avenues, such as letters, telephone, and e-mail. One recent mediation client sent videos of herself reading bedtime stories to her children who lived far away. The kids loved it.

Cut The Conflict

The more conflict between you and your ex, the greater the stress for your children. Kids usually show this stress by acting out – doing poorly in school, getting into trouble, or picking fights with peers. None of this does them any good and sometimes it can be quite dangerous. So what your kids need is for you and your ex to settle the terms of your divorce – financial and family issues – without the nastiness; set up a co-parenting plan that avoids fights; and work out a way to resolve future problems calmly.

Most people accomplish this through mediation. In mediation, divorcing spouses meet with a neutral professional to work out a fair and legally binding out-of-court settlement. The settlement must be approved by a judge, so it has to be similar to one you might reach after a long litigation.

Mediation also equips parents with skills to resolve future conflicts, and avoid explosive disagreements that can spill over into their children's lives later on. And you can also mediate after your divorce settlement is final, when disputes arise concerning custody and visitation or financial issues.

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