

Handouts

What Matters

by "Kevin"

I'm 24 and I haven't lived with either of my parents for almost six years.

My parents still haven't officially divorced, and I'm not sure they ever will. They don't live together, and what they decide about that doesn't even seem to matter so much to me now. When I was growing up, I was scared to death of their getting a divorce, but now I'm not so sure why. A lot of my friends had divorced parents, and they seemed okay. But maybe that's just how it looked from the outside.

I have to admit I take some satisfaction out of not having much to do with either of them anymore. We can't seem to talk about what really happened, and I don't feel like it's up to me to make things better or more honest than they are.

What strikes me most in looking back is how my older sister and I would spend so much energy taking the temperature of everything. When the fight was on or, maybe worse, when I thought it was about to start up, I looked out for everything. In a second, teams and school and friends didn't matter. And what seemed to suck up all my energy were the smallest things. What room was my mom in? Was my dad too close? Did the stupid dinner rolls get burned? Did my dad forget something from the store? Did my mom start to refer to my dad as "your father"?

My parents either didn't know or didn't care. They called the shots, so maybe they didn't know that for us every minute had its doubts.

I listened for any clue how life would go. How did my mom sound when she said she needed help with the dishes. Was it a request, or was it a complaint about what life had done to her? How was my dad going to interpret it? What was the look on everybody's face? How angry did their breathing sound? What was just the right amount of quiet? Was there too much or too little? How close was either of them to going to bed?

And mostly, I think I listened for how things were touched. How hard the salt was put down after somebody used it. The way the dog's food can was slapped against her bowl to get the food out. Was the extra banging just my imagination, or was the world about to explode? I listened for the way the doors sounded when they were closed. My mom and dad loved to fight with slamming doors, sometimes starting with just a little extra push and building from there.

And when this was going on, all I could think about was how ashamed and scared I felt and whether there was some way I could get them to stop.

I don't remember growing more able to deal with it as I got older. I stayed the same small foolish boy who once tried to hide under his sister's bed. A counselor used to tell me I shouldn't feel responsible for what they did. I know that's right, but even now those still seem like just so many words.

Partly to escape, I think, I read all the time, but it grew hard to think in school or even to want to do well. Once my dad yelled at my mom that it was a miracle I ever learned anything with the way she was acting. It sounds funny, but for a while, I became guilty that I ever made good grades. My grades had given my dad one more thing to throw in a fight.

My sister had more problems than I do. But I still find it hard to think about things that once were important. If things go well, I finally graduate from college, but it's taken almost two extra years. I did poorly and had to leave my first school, and I really don't see what I'll do with what I've studied.

I don't want to make excuses, but my life has become a lot like what happened during those fights. I think less and less about the dreams I used to have, while I can't seem to stop thinking about what's wrong with everything.

Growing up like we did isn't about big dreams. It's about the sounds doors make when they close.

HOW TO BUILD A COPARENTING RELATIONSHIP {EVEN WHEN YOU THINK YOU CAN'T}

Here is a comment I've heard too many times to count-in therapy, in workshops, from people I meet while traveling: "Now that I'm divorced, my therapist keeps lecturing me on the value of coparenting. While I can see why it' s best for our children, and I would do anything for them, the truth is my ex and I simply cannot maintain *even* a civil relationship. The whole reason we got divorced is that we couldn't agree on things, including raising our kids. And now we're expected to magically agree or risk our kids growing up with serious problems. The upshot is I feel like I'm less of a parent and that my children are doomed forever because my ex and I cannot be in the same room together. What's the solution?"

As I' ve said before, divorce often presents us with problems that have no clear-cut solutions. For many families, the best, most realistic course is learning how to cope. The promotion of coparenting-in which each parent has roughly equal input and involvement- as an ideal relationship for families of divorce has had several positive effects, namely keeping both parents actively engaged in a child's life. Yet there are many divorced couples for whom coparenting is simply not a viable, realistic option, for whom the pressure to coparent often results in more conflict. For all the positiv e benefits of coparenting, among divorced couples a solid, low- or no-conflict relationship soon after divorce seems to be the exception not the rule.

While divorce may seem to solve one problem, it often creates others. Conflict between ex-spouses is, perhaps understandably, all too common. With the marriage ended, ex-spouses often lack th e incentive to work toward compromise. You may be reading this, thinking, *If we could have communicated an cooperated before, we wouldn't have divorced in the first place*, and you're right. But keep in mind that just because t he two of you couldn't make one type of relationship {a marriage} work, that does not mean that you cannot be successful in a different one, coparenting.

Most parents do want to do what's best for their kids, but the intense emotions of divorce cloud their *views*. In rare cases, both exes dig in their heels and refuse to go to *give* an inch on anything, no matter how trivial. More often, however, one parent is willing to give in and overlook the other's bad behavior for a while. After a few arguments, some insult s and a few times "forgetting" to pick up the kids, the more cooperative parent just *gives* up and gives in to what our children would call the dark side: "What's the difference what I

do? He'll never change." The next thing you know, Mom is slamming down the phone every time Dad calls to wish Jenny happy birthday, and Dad keeps "forgetting" to get Carlos back home in time for Sunday dinner at Grandmother's.

It's important for parents to *view* their coparenting venture in both the long and the short term. The fact is fewer divorced coup les have respectful, cooperative, relationships in the imm ediate wake of divorce. If this is where you find yourself, know that you are not alone, and you may want to take extra care of avo id conflict. However, before you decide that this is how it will always be and that t here's no point in extendi ng yourself, you should also know that, after a few years, that situation usually changes. While divorced spouses may not consider each other buddies, most do manage to establish a civil, if not cordial relationsh ip, if only for the sake of their children. Doing this may require you to separate your personal issues with your ex from those that involve your children. It may also require you to compromise a litt le more than you might like at times, to bite your tongue, and to hold your anger. Always remember, however, that you have a clear and worthwhile goal: your child's abil ity to grow through this divorce.

Redefine your relationship. If you cannot *view* your ex as a friend, think of him as a business partner, and your child as your business. Many business partners are not good friends, yet their common goal allows them to respect each other ' s strengths and overlook each other's shortcomings.

Choose your battles wisely. Differences in your parenting styles tend to become more pronounced- and the incent ive t o compromise less compe ll ing- after divorce. Recognize the contro l you do have over yhour child while at the same time learning to accept what you cannot control. {See chapter 12.}

Respect your ex's relationship with your child. No one has yet discovered the one "right" way to be a parent. Respect and stay out of your child's unique relationship wit h your ex (assuming it is not an abusive situation), just as you would wish your ex not to int erf ere with your relationship with your child. (See chapters 12 and 13.)

- ✓ *Respect your ex's relationship with your child.* No one has yet discovered the one "right" way to be a parent. Respect and stay out of your child's unique relationship with your ex (assuming it is not an abusive situation), just as you would wish your ex not to interfere with your relationship with your child. (See chapters 12 and 13.)
- ✓ *When you have good cause to be concerned about your ex's parenting behavior, discuss it in a nonthreatening manner.* Pepper your conversation liberally with expressions like:
 - "perhaps just consider. . ." (as opposed to "You should. . .")
 - "Obviously, it's up to you. . ." (as opposed to "I think you ought to. . .")
 - "In case this is helpful. . ." (as opposed to "The way I do things. . .")
 - "It may not work for you, but here's something that worked for me. . ." (as opposed to "Try it this way. . .")
 - "Of course you can figure out your own solutions, but here's an idea if you want to consider it. . ." (as opposed to "Here's the solution. . .")
 Before you open your mouth or dial the number, resolve to resist the impulse to call names, explode in anger, or shut down communication completely. If your ex will not listen to you, consider asking a friend, family member or someone your ex respects to speak on your behalf. This might upset your ex, so be sure your point is important and that there is a reasonable chance that the behavior will change. If your ex has ever abuse your child—emotionally, physically, or sexually—or you have reason to suspect he or she may be doing so now, you have an obligation to contact authorities (e.g. pediatrician, psychotherapist, police, attorney, public abuse investigative bureau) and take the proper steps to protect your child. (See page 297.)
- ✓ *Go out of your way to ensure that your ex is included in your child's life.* Be sure your ex is notified as early as possible of upcoming school events (see box "The Importance of School," page 51), extracurricular activities, and other important occasions in your child's life. Even the most recalcitrant parents have a hard time remaining angry and bitter with an ex who makes an apparent effort to keep them in the loop.
- ✓ *Try not to fight, and especially never in front of your child.* It's important to realize that, for most children, the one good thing to come out of divorce is the end of their parents' fighting. In our Sandcastles Survey (see page 419), 35.2 percent of eight- to ten-year-olds completed the sentence "I am sad when. . ." with "parents fight." Over 30

percent gave the same response to the sentence when "I cry when. . ." For most older children in the Survey, divorce brings a dramatic drop in parental conflict. Over 70 percent of eleven- to thirteen-year-olds and 74.3 percent of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds said that their parents "argued a lot" before the divorce. After divorce, however, only 32 percent of eleven- to thirteen-year-olds and approximately 38 percent of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds said their parents still fought. Although you will probably disagree with your ex, stop short of arguing, if you can. Remember that every time you two fight, your child is drawn back to the most painful moments of her past. For her sake, be smart enough to walk away or hang up the phone (cordially, of course) if you sense your or your ex's anger escalating or the line of discussion beginning to fall into an old familiar rut that you know will end badly. Say, "I want to talk about his more, but I need to think things out first," and call a time-out.

- ✓ *Be flexible.* Life heeds no schedule, not even the one the court may have hammered out for visitation. Everyone has to swap weekend visits now and then or request a special visit because Grandpa is in town from Italy only those three days. Work with your ex to accommodate these changes. (See chapter 12.)
- ✓ *Remember that "coparenting" is not always synonymous with "equal parenting."* Maybe your ex isn't as emotionally involved with your children as you think she should be, maybe he doesn't do all those "dad" things your father did. Does that make your ex a "bad" parent? No. As you may know from your own childhood, even in happy, intact families, one parent dominates in terms of being the emotional one or the "psychological" parent—the one a child turns to for support, advice and nurturing. Be that parent for your child, even if your ex cannot, and he will thrive.
- ✓ *When making a decision about your child, think first: What is in my child's best interest?* Too often one ex says no simply because the other is saying yes. Recognize and learn to separate your personal issues with your ex from what is best for your child. If you have trouble doing this, then seek help from understanding but reasonable family, friends, clergy or a therapist. (See the box "Deciding on Therapy," page 189.) On the journey to help your child grow through divorce, learn to leave your baggage at home.

Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way. Neuman, L.M.H.C., Gary. Random House, 1998.

Different Ages and How They React

Dr. Elaine Collins

Zero to Three Years Old

Babies and toddlers in this age group are just beginning to form attachments. They need to have time with both parents. Since they cannot communicate their feelings, they will show you in their behavior. Also, babies and toddlers pick up on emotions that others are conveying. They can be sensitive to anger, fear and stress. It is important to try to remain calm and nurturing as much as possible.

Three to Five Years Old

Children in this age group need to feel loved and accepted. Being patient with them while they go through changes in their routines will help them adjust better. Expect some temporary regression in their behaviors, since they may be dealing with new emotions that they don't quite understand. Keep them informed of what is going to happen, (i.e., who is picking them up, where they will be staying) so that there are few surprises. These children are also sensitive to your emotions of anger, fear, etc.

Five to Ten Years Old

Children in this age group are now forming relationships outside the home, and having friends. They are becoming more aware of how the divorce is going to change their lives. They may still feel that they are responsible in some way. They may also show more anger, and acting out behaviors, knowing that they don't have control over what is happening. Consistency and predictability between parents will help these children to feel less out of control, and more secure. Encourage your child's areas of interests and social outlets, as a way to help them to begin to know and understand themselves.

Ten to Twelve Years Old

This is the age of growing into adolescence. They are beginning to have opinions and beliefs of their own. They are much more aware of what is going on around them. They may have more questions, as they are trying to make sense of the changes that are taking place. It is important to be honest with your adolescent, without giving them information that will burden them, or put them in a position of feeling that they have to take sides. Children in this age group will be more able to express their feelings, although they may not have a realistic view of the whole picture just yet.

Thirteen to Fifteen Years Old

Adolescents in this age group are observant and aware of what is going on. In some cases, they may actually be relieved that you are discussing the situation with them, rather than trying to pretend. They are also learning more about themselves and the world through school and friends, and may start to have differing views and values, as well as challenge some of yours. Adolescents in this age group may show irritability, anger, or isolation in reaction to the changes that are happening. It is important to allow them to express themselves, without fear of rejection, or retaliation, and to support them as well as guide them through their challenges as they sort things out.

Sixteen to Eighteen Years Old

This is the age of the beginning of Young Adulthood. They have the most awareness of what is going between parents, and may have strong opinions about each parent's role in the divorce. These youth have a strong developing social network, and are beginning to identify with who they are, and of their own values. They may want to be more involved in decisions about parenting time, and involvement. Including them in this decision making can help them to feel they have a voice, although requests have to be fair and equitable to all involved. Expect that you will have to share your parenting time with their other social outlets, since these are an important part of development to all teens. Also, it is important to realize that while they may complain to you about the other parent, your job is to be supportive, without providing your own personal views of that parent. It is natural for teens to want to vent, but may react with anger and betrayal when you reciprocate.

Talking to Your Child

Children love their parents because of their bond and involvement in their lives, rather than the legal status they have. When you are not parenting as a couple, your child most likely will ask why you and their other parent do not live together. Most children want to have information about both of their parents, especially as they get older, and understand more.

*Remember, children who feel comfortable expressing themselves to their parents feel more accepted, and will grow up to be more effective communicators. They also will learn to consider other's points of view, as well as learn problem solving techniques in their own future relationships.

1. **Take the time to see the situation through your child's eyes. Allow them to express their feelings, even if what they say is hurtful or causes you to have guilt feelings. Avoid angry confrontations. If either you or they become angry, take a break, and assure your child that you meet again, later to resume the conversation.**
2. **One person talks at a time. Stay in the present, and do not bring up past events. Do not tease or make light of what your child is communicating. Validate their expression of their feelings, even if you disagree with their perceptions.**
3. **Exercise patience. Do not judge what they are saying, or jump to conclusions, even if you feel you are being attacked. Allow them to say what they need to, before responding. Interrupting to defend yourself can cause them to shut down. If you are feeling defensive, hurt, or angry, tell them you would like to think about what they've said, before you respond. You do not need to respond immediately, if you need to take time to process things.**
4. **Use "I" statements. "I want; I feel; I think," etc. Do not use "You" statements, since they tend to sound accusatory, or lay blame.**
5. **Try to make surroundings as comfortable as possible:
When discussions are planned, make sure electronics and cell phones are turned off, or out of reach. Plan for a time when there are least distractions or interruptions. Make sure your child is comfortable, and that you are at eye level with them, preferably sitting down. When discussions are spontaneous, take steps to set up as many of the suggestions mentioned above as possible.**
6. **Avoid asking "Why" questions. "Why" questions can cause a child to feel invalidated or that their feelings are wrong. Ask them to elaborate if you need more clarity, or ask what you can do to help them or support them.**
7. **Do not give them false hope, or make promises that you can't keep. Assure them that you will do your best to help them, and will be there for them. And assure them that you will love them no matter what!**

Feelings Expressed Through Behavior

1. Anxiety and Fear

May be expressed through bedwetting, crying and nightmares and should be dealt with by giving comfort and repeated reassurances through actions and words. (In the case of bedwetting, a physical examination should determine whether there are physical causes.)

2. Security Seeking

May be expressed through hoarding, thumb-sucking, masturbation, overeating or running away. Time will be needed to establish trust and faith.

3. Hostility and Anger

Will be expressed through destructiveness, fighting aggressive behavior, cruelty and stealing and should be dealt with by recognizing that anger is a natural reaction and that one has to learn how to handle it. Allow children to discuss their angry feelings and create ways of "discharging" these feelings that are less destructive and annoying. Firm kind discipline may have to be used to protect people and property. Parents must not, however, fall into the trap of exhibiting lack of control.

4. Depression and Helplessness

May be expressed through apathy, withdrawal, isolation refusal to eat. These behaviors should be dealt with by attempts to stimulate interest involving children in small tasks or family activities and constantly showing that you care about them.

5. Frustration

May be expressed by temper tantrums, overeating and in older children, use of drugs.

6. Need for Compensation for Losses

May be expressed through stealing, lying, fantasizing. Children should be given allowances and have opportunities to earn money and spend it. Children should be helped to control the desire for instant gratification which causes some kinds of stealing. The stealing should be discussed, and better ways of meeting needs introduced. Child should not be exposed to situations that encourage stealing until they have developed controls. Drug abuse is a symptom of many behavioral problems and should be dealt within a series of seminars.

Simple Facts/Hard Challenges

When Co-Parenting is Successful Children will:

1. Be more likely to do well in school and in life
2. Be more likely to have the time, attention and financial support of both mother and father on a consistent and regular basis
3. Be less likely to have the emotional scars that can result from having an absent parent
4. Learn that even when parents no longer love each other, they can both love their child
5. Avoid being used as a pawn in the war between two parents
6. Love and grow to respect both parents

Ways to Accomplish This:

- Communicate Clearly
- Disagree Respectfully
- Manage Your Anger
- Plan and Dream about your child's future

Ask Yourself:

What are your hopes and dreams for your child?

What interests or talents do you want to encourage? What kind of person would you like your child to be?

Do's and Don'ts of Co-parenting

Deborah Serani, PsyD.: Psychology Today

Do:

1. Commit to making co-parenting an open dialogue with your
2. Ex. Rules should be consistent and agreed upon at both
3. households. Commit to positive talk around the house.
4. Agree on boundaries and behavioral
5. guidelines. Create an Extended Family Plan.
6. Recognize that co-parenting will challenge
7. you. Be aware of slippery slopes.
8. Be boring.
9. Update often
10. Go for the high notes.

Don't:

1. Don't burden your child.
2. Don't jump to conclusions or condemn your Ex.
3. Don't be an unbalanced parent.
4. Don't give in to guilt.
5. Don't punish your Ex by allowing your child to wiggle out of responsibility.
6. Don't punish your kids to get back at your Ex.
7. Don't accuse. Discuss.

Children's Bill of Rights

- 1) The right **not** to be asked to "choose sides" between the parties.
- 2) The right **not** to be told the details of bitter, nasty divorce proceedings, separation or Court proceedings.
- 3) The right **not** to be told "bad things" about the other party's personality and/or character.
- 4) The right to privacy when talking to either party on the telephone.
- 5) The right **not** to be cross-examined by one party after having visitation or talking with the other party.
- 6) The right **not** to be asked to be a messenger from one party to the other.
- 7) The right **not** to be asked by one party to tell the other party untruths.
- 8) The right **not** to be used as a confidant regarding the Court proceedings by one party or the other.
- 9) The right to express feelings, whatever those feelings are.
- 10) The right to choose **not** to express certain feelings.
- 11) The right to be protected from party warfare.
- 12) The right **not** to be made to feel guilty for **LOVING BOTH PARTIES.**

Credits

Newman, M. G. & Romanowski, P. (1998). Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way. G.K.N. Corporation, Random House, Inc.

Serani, D. (2012). The Do's and Don'ts of Co-Parenting Well. Psychology Today.

THANK YOU