

5 Steps To Help Children Cope During A Divorce

Written by Written by Sheilah D. Vance, Esq.

July is National Child-Centered Divorce Month, so Sheila D. Vance is helping to bring attention to children's emotional needs when parents divorce or separate.□□



Parent's hearts continue to break every day as they help their children cope with the challenges of divorce. There are no magic bullets or easy answers for parents as they help their children find their way. Yet, in going through my own divorce some ten years ago and in counseling my clients, I have found that keeping the following five things in mind can be very helpful:□□

1. Let the children be children. All of the issues related to divorce can be overwhelming for the adults involved, but imagine how your children feel? Don't saddle them with information that should best be left to adults. Tell the children enough about your divorce so that they don't feel completely left in the dark and wondering what happened or is happening. But don't tell them so much that they feel overwhelmed in trying to understand and handle issues that are way too mature for them. For example, it's fine to tell the children that the two of you have decided that you no longer want to be married because of how you feel about each other, because the children will think, at least in some way, that the divorce is about them. Give them the space to be children, even though they will have to deal with adult issues that may force them to grow up faster than children whose parents are not divorced. Also, don't bad mouth the other parent in front of them. That is too much information for them to handle. Let them grow and mature into an understanding of each parent's personality. They will reach their own conclusions about each parent based on that parent's behavior as they mature physically and mentally.□

2. Make it your top priority to provide a safe, secure and peaceful environment for your children so that they can grow into happy, healthy and independent adults. Realize that you will have to make many sacrifices to do that, and you will probably have to put many things on hold. As adults, we all have our own needs. However, as parents, it is our responsibility, both morally and legally, to provide for our children's needs. At the top of our children's needs lists are such things as unconditional love, peace, comfort, and security. When your children reach

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adulthood as happy, healthy and independent individuals, you will feel a sense of pride for helping to get them there.□□

Part of providing that peaceful, safe and secure environment relates to where and how you live. Post-separation, you may not be able to live at the lifestyle that you've lived at before, but try to make your living situation as stable as possible to keep the change in your child's life to a minimum. You may not be able to now buy the type of car that you used to have or live in the type of house or apartment that you used to. However much that may bother you, it is important that you only buy what you can afford—or even less than you can afford—so you can keep those things and not add more financial stress to your plate or change brought on by lack of finances. But realize that both parents have a legal responsibility to support their child, so make sure that you file for the child support that you have a right to, which can be done with or without a lawyer. □

3. Regular contact with two parents who love them is beneficial to the child. Allow and encourage regular visitations with the non-custodial parent, which may be mandated by court order, if such contact would not be physically or mentally harmful to the child. Children usually love both parents and need their support and nurturing. Even though you may not want to turn around and see your ex at every Little League game or school concert, your children usually do.

4. Find your children a place where they can express their feelings to someone else besides you. Many schools have support groups or special counseling for children's whose parents are divorcing, so tell your children's teachers. The teacher can also be on the alert for any changes in your child's behavior and academic performance, understand why they may be occurring, and put in place a plan to help the child. Also, your house of worship may have a group for children whose parents are divorcing, as well as a local community center. These groups help children realize that they are not alone, and they give them a safe space to air their feelings without fear and to work through them with help.□□

5. If you are the custodial parent, understand that your child may act out more with you than the non-custodial parent, and work through that acting out together. Children may act out more with the parent who stayed. They know that you're not going to leave them, so they feel more secure expressing their anger and hurt with you. They may actually be on their best behavior with the parent who left because they feel they have to be "good kids" with that parent to maintain that relationship. So, if your children express their anger with you, don't be surprised. Further, don't take it personally to the extent that your feelings are so hurt and you feel even more guilt and shame than you normally do. Think about whether what your children may say about you, such as that you get too angry too often, has value in your own self-reflective

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process. But understand that what's going on, even if they never admit it to themselves or to you, is that they feel comfortable enough with you to express exactly what's on their mind, and the healing grows from there.[] []

Hopefully, these five things will help you and your children go through a period of extreme change and upheaval into a better and brighter future.[] []

About the Author: Sheilah D. Vance, Esq. is an attorney in private practice in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is also the author of the novel, Land Mines, which is about how a woman copes with the land mines of separation, divorce and dating again and rebuilds her life and that of her children. You may read about it at www.TheElevatorGroup.com and contact Sheilah at info@TheElevatorGroup.com

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