

Divorce and Children - How To Lessen the Pain

Divorce hurts, even in the best of situations. And when children are involved, the divorce process is often a confusing, frightening and painful experience for the entire family.

Recent findings, however, indicate that the long-term effects of divorce on children may not be as serious as many parents fear. Even better news is the finding that parents can help minimize the pain of divorce for their children.

Numerous studies, including one over a ten year period by the National Institute of Mental Health, have found that in the majority of cases, a divorce does not cause permanent damage to the children involved. Such studies also show, however, that when parents handle the divorce poorly in relation to their children, there certainly is the potential for serious harm.

What advice do experts offer to parents for whom divorce is the right answer? The first suggestion may seem to conflict with the standard advice for divorcing parents not to be openly hostile. Experts say it is also counterproductive to be too friendly.

When kids see their parents as still "good friends," it leaves them confused and frustrated as to why they are no longer together. More importantly, it creates for the kids the false hope that their parents will eventually get back together.

Divorcing parents, however, should be civil to one another and continue to communicate in regard to the children. The relationship needs to be on a professional level. Issues such as the kids' schooling, health, and related activities need to be addressed by both parents.

But sharing details about each parent's personal life should be off limits. Discussions of job situations, new relationships and similar personal details serve to confuse the kids about the finality of the divorce and the true relationship between the two people they love and trust.

Another suggestion to help protect the kids in a divorce is to have them spend time with each parent. Studies show a clear link between how well a child adjusts to a divorce and the amount of time spent with each parent. Parents who use their children as a means of getting back at their ex, such as cutting or canceling visitation rights, unfairly place their children in the middle of their disagreements and can cause very real damage.

Children are also negatively affected when parents use them to deal with the pain and guilt the parent might be feeling. Fathers, for example, using custody visits to lavish expensive gifts and "anything-you-want" activities are trying to buy freedom from their own guilt. But the kids usually see what is happening and why. Most children say they would much prefer to spend quality time with their dad, rather than pursuing a frantic schedule of "fun" activities.

Another potential source of pain for kids is when a parent has only bad things to say about an ex. This forces a child to take sides when all he or she wants is to be able to love both parents. Kids don't like being caught in the middle, and aside from the emotional damage this process can have, it also often backfires, causing the kids to take the side of the parent who is the target of all the nasty stories.

One last but important piece of advice for helping kids come through a divorce successfully is to be honest. Children are usually well aware of what is really happening and pretending to them that nothing is wrong can have serious negative effects.

Kids living in divorced households with this type of "it's all just fine" atmosphere often end up depressed and with serious anxiety and school problems. They see their parents can't be honest with them, and end up hiding their own feelings and worries. Much better than pretending nothing is wrong is to honestly discuss, in an age-appropriate manner, how things have changed. Let your kids express their questions and fears, and let them know that they are still very much loved.

Divorce is always a painful process for all involved. But dealing honestly and fairly with your children can help minimize the long term effects for them. If you feel you need help in handling the divorce process, seek out the assistance of a qualified counseling professional who specializes in family counseling.

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