

## **Best Interests of Children in Divorce**

As you proceed through your divorce you are probably very concerned about the effects on your children. What hurts children most is witnessing conflict and hostility between their parents. Research shows that children who live with parental conflict have adjustment problems as they get older. That is the case whether or not their parents get divorced (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, What about the Kids. 2003). Divorce does not necessarily harm children; parental conflict in front of them does. It's best when parents try not to argue or demean each other in front of their children.

Children whose parents are divorcing often feel insecure and afraid. They often believe that they are to blame for their parents' dissension and divorce. They may believe that they can stop the divorce if they behave better.

Many younger children are afraid of abandonment. If one parent leaves the home, they imagine that the other could leave them too. They are afraid that there will be no one to care for them. Children's stories like Hansel and Gretel and the movie Home Alone, play on these fears.

Children need constant reassurance that both of their parents love them. They need to feel sure that their parents will be there for them in good times and in bad and that both parents will always take care of them.

Parents need to tell children repeatedly that there is no such thing as being divorced from their mother or father. Parents' behavior must give them the same unconditional, loving message. To reinforce that message, parents should show up on time for scheduled visits and pick up, or drop off, children on time. Failure to do this is a major stress for children and a major source of conflict between parents.

Here are some suggestions for you as parents to help you and your children during the divorce and afterwards. They are designed to help you protect your children from damaging side effects of divorce:

- Don't discuss your divorce problems or argue in front of your children.
- Don't use your children as messengers.
- If you make negative comments about your spouse, even in a joking manner, your children may get angry with you because children never want to hear anything negative about either of their parents.
- Maintain your positive parenting - your children want and need structure and limits (Make sure that your children are doing all they are supposed to be doing, like homework and other obligations).

- Reassure the children that you and your spouse love them and you both will always love them and take care of them.
- Reassure the children that the divorce is not their fault in any way.
- Let them know that there is nothing that they can do or say to prevent the divorce.
- Give age appropriate explanations to the children about your plans before you separate.
- Tell them your plans about the time they will spend with you, and where they will live and attend school. Invite questions and give age-appropriate answers.
- Maintain a positive attitude in front of your children - smile.
- Reduce stress by including physical exercise as a part of your regular activities together.
- Give each of your children their own journal where they can record their activities, and feelings through drawings and writing.
- Encourage your children to maintain, or develop hobbies and socialize with friends.
- Show your interest in your children's lives: Ask about school activities; go to parent teacher night; volunteer at their school; attend functions that are important to them.
- Have some fun with your children - take them to a ballgame, movie or museum.
- Keep your promises to your children.
- Your children may need to talk to an impartial, trusted adult, a counselor, a relative, a member of the clergy, or a therapist to deal with their fears and emotions surrounding the divorce.

Most important of all:

- Enjoy your children and let them be children when they are with you.
- Take care of yourself so that you can care for your children.
- Remember, when one door closes, another one opens.