

Kids in the Middle of Divorce: Four Suggestions for a Healthy Future

by Judy Berkowitz and John Borders

Divorce Hurts. It hurts everyone involved. Whether it is a “good” divorce or a “bad” divorce – it hurts. Parents usually know what is going to happen. They usually have someone to talk to. Whether it is a friend, lawyer, therapist or family member, they can vent their frustrations, discuss their worries, and prepare for what is to come. Kids don’t. They can’t. They have no control over the situation and some, because of their age, don’t have the capacity to understand, much less deal with, the situation.

Parents often ask us how they can know if their child is affected by the divorce. The answer is easy to give, but hard to hear. All children are affected by their parents’ divorce—emotionally, cognitively, and financially. Whether one sees a change of behavior in a child or not, one can assume that they are hurt, worried, angry... The list goes on and on. For children, divorce does not have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is a process. The process and the adjustments continue as children age, as parents remarry, as new step-siblings enter the picture. For children, divorce is an abrupt and scary end to “normal.” It is also the start of a new kind of family—two new families actually.

What can parents do to help their children through this difficult family transition? A lot. We offer some simple yet essential tips for creating a safe, loving, caring environment for children who will thrive and become well-balanced adults capable of maintaining positive relationships and raising healthy children of their own.

Reduce Conflict

Conflict, or rather the lack of conflict, is a key element in helping children cope with separation, divorce and remarriage. Long after the divorce papers are signed and the custody agreements are finalized, parents often continue to argue in person, over the phone, or by e-mail. They may talk about each other in a disapproving way or leave nasty voice mail messages. Some parents maintain a high level of conflict with multiple court

proceedings, public arguments and calls to the police. Children see it, hear it, sense it, model it, and sometimes feel responsible for it. There is a direct relationship between the amount of enduring, unresolved conflict between parents and the emotional health of their children. Reducing conflict, arguments and name calling will reduce the negative impact on kids.

Parents can help reduce conflict if they:

- Resist arguing with the other parent in front of their children.
- Avoid discussing disagreements about scheduling or other child-related issues in front of them.
- Avoid making negative remarks about one another in front of the children.
- Ask grandparents and others involved to avoid saying bad things about the other parent to the children.
- Encourage children to be respectful to both parents. This is hard to do if the parents are speaking or acting in ways that are disrespectful to each other. However—as is noted by several of our colleagues in this book—what children see, they often do.

Make Communication Positive

Positive communication goes hand in hand with reducing conflict. Parents need to find a way to communicate with each other about child-related matters that is productive, efficient, and conflict free. Sometimes that might mean politely hanging up the phone when the conversation starts to get heated. Other times it might mean communicating about scheduling issues by e-mail. Parents also need to allow children to communicate their feelings about themselves, the divorce or the other parent without being afraid to do so. Though children's feelings may be negative, parents will help their children's future development more if they can focus as much as possible on positive issues.

It is helpful for parents to:

- Communicate with the other parent directly rather than through the children. Kids should not be messengers. It puts a burden on them and causes guilt and anxiety.

- Allow your children the time and the opportunity to be children, not parental confidants. Don't overburden them with adult issues.
- Listen to your children and focus on their perspective without commenting on the "facts" about the other parent.
- Talk to your children about what is going to happen, especially when it concerns moving or changing schools. Prepare them in a positive way.
- Encourage your children to speak openly about feelings and concerns.
- Refrain from asking your children to "report" on the other parent. Children should never be put in the position of being the family spy.
- Refrain from discussing adult issues with your children, such as legal matters, dating or financial concerns related to child or spousal support.
- Tell the children's teachers and school counselors what is happening in the family. They can be important resources for parents and a source of comfort for the children.

Ensure Consistency

All children benefit from consistency, routines and traditions. It is difficult to maintain these things when children live in two separate households. Young children, especially, experience anxiety when their routines and bedtime rituals are changed from day to day and from household to household.

It is helpful for parents to:

- Provide a consistent, reliable, predictable, stable environment in both households.
- Agree as much as possible to establish regular routines and rituals, as well as consistent rules and consequences.
- Maintain visitation and custody schedules.
- Understand that consistency does not mean rigidity. Sometimes a schedule needs to be changed or a child needs something different. If parents are able to discuss such situations in advance, both families will benefit.

Build Connection and Community

People need to feel connected with others, part of a community, part of a family. Children in transition due to their parents' divorce may have fears of abandonment. "If daddy doesn't love mommy anymore, maybe he won't love me either." Emotional and physical connections are important for all children, but even more so for those whose families have become disconnected. There is no need for any parent or child to feel like they are going through this alone. Making use of the people and resources in the community is a positive way to gain support and education and build resiliency in adults and children alike.

Parents, educators and counselors can work together to reduce conflict and increase positive communication, consistency and connection.

"... just the beginning of what should be many discussions about setting aside their personal issues and focusing on the best interests of their children"

It is helpful for parents to:

- Allow children to spend time with, and encourage them to openly express their love for, both parents (except, of course, in cases of domestic violence, child abuse, or substance abuse, in which case supervised visitation may be in order).
- Allow children to remain connected to both parents' families. Relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are important.
- Encourage children to explore and develop areas of interest that they feel good about, such as hobbies, sports, arts and crafts, or reading. Participating in positive group activities such as a choir, dance club or soccer league will help them feel in control and connected with others.
- Seek counseling for yourself and for your children at any time during and after the divorce. Group counseling is especially helpful for children. It "normalizes" the situation and allows them to learn from each other.
- Seek professional help if you feel you find that you are unable to manage your child or if single parenting is difficult.
- Maintain your children's usual involvement and activities in the community through the schools, faith based organizations, athletic activities and other community organizations. Keeping children involved

in outside activities, and sharing those experiences with them will help parents and children feel connected and grounded throughout the changes in their lives.

Nearly 50% of all marriages end in divorce. In the United States alone, one million children are affected by their parents' divorce every single year. The points above are just the beginning of what should be many discussions between parents about setting aside their personal issues and focusing on the best interests of their children. For some parents, these discussions are easily done alone or with the help of a mediator or counselor. For others, the discussions are difficult and made more so by unresolved anger, blame or grief and require intensive assistance from mental health professionals. The prospect of a good life and healthy relationships for children of divorce are made better by the efforts of their parents. It can be done. Divorce hurts, but we can do much to ensure a bright future for our children.

Judy Berkowitz, M.Ed., is Executive Director of Kids In the Middle (KITM), a 501(c) (3) not-for-profit agency specializing in counseling for children and families experiencing separation, divorce and remarriage. Ms. Berkowitz worked for twenty years as a therapist and clinic coordinator at Jewish Family Services in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and four years as the Executive Director of the St. Louis Chapter of Hadassah before joining KITM in 2004.

John Borders, LCSW, has been the Clinical Director at KITM since February 2006. Mr. Borders has worked extensively as a therapist providing child and adolescent mental health treatment and is a Clinically Certified Forensic Counselor and Certified Child Custody Evaluator. For more information about Kids In the Middle, visit www.kidsinthemiddle.org.