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## **What Parents Can Do to Help Children with Divorce**

Parents do not have to be friends after divorce, being considerate and business like is more realistic. Treat the other parent as you would a business partner. Keep in mind the "mission statement" of this new business is to raise the best children possible. Consider how you would behave with a business associate you were trying to close an important deal with (you probably wouldn't resort to name calling).

**1. Be on time.** Being late is inconsiderate of the other parent and the child. Being late can interfere with the other parent's plans and hurt the feelings of the child who is waiting for you. It can also disrupt the child's routine.

**2. Stay out of conflict with the other parent.** When discussing a challenging parenting issue, take a time out, take a concern "under advisement," cool down, do some processing, and then contact the other parent with your thoughts. There are two sides to effective parenting communication after divorce: (1) learn to raise issues respectfully and without blaming and (2) learn to respond to a parent's concerns without defensiveness and argument. You will need to learn to attack problems together, not attack each other because there is a problem. Former partners know how to push one another's buttons and this can sabotage a business-like relationship. The following is a possible way to address concerns respectfully:

a. Begin by asking if this is an acceptable time to talk. Make sure you can have the other parent's (and give your own) undivided attention for a sufficient amount of time to have a productive discussion.

b. Avoid making statements which can be interpreted as blaming or attacking the other parent. Make a statement to encourage cooperative problem solving such as: "We have a problem; I need your help."

c. Calmly and objectively describe the situation and how it is a problem for you or the child.

d. Avoid interrupting. Sometimes the need to interrupt can be helped by taking notes while the other parent is talking. You want to learn to respond, not react.

e. Before responding with your perspective, ask questions of the other parent and listen to their answers. You want to really understand the problem from the other parent's perspective. After both parents have shared perspectives, it's much easier to find solutions that will work for both of you and the child.

f. Remember you are trying to win cooperation from the other parent to solve the problem in your child's best interests. If you blame and attack, you will alienate and invite counterattack.

g. Also remember you are having a respectful conversation because you love your children and value a cooperative coparenting relationship.

h. If you get uncomfortable, feel defensive, or find yourself wanting to blame or attack the other parent, disengage before an argument begins. Take the matter "under advisement." Make a statement such as, "I need to think about this. I'll call you back tomorrow."

i. When calm, continue discussions and work together to find a solution acceptable to both of you.

j. Create an implementation plan for addressing the problem: who is going to do what by when.

k. When appropriate, take turns putting your plan/agreement in writing and share it with the other parent.

**3. Never allocate the other parent's resources (emotional, physical, financial) without their permission.** This means not signing a child up for an extracurricular activity (like soccer or a paper route) when it is the other parent's time with the child without talking it over with the other parent first. When a child is invited to a birthday party, and he or she is supposed to be with the other parent that day, have the child call the other parent and make the arrangements with that parent. It is so easy to get involved in these situations, try to remember this is their business, not yours.

**4. Avoid putdowns and talking negatively about the other parent when the children are present.** Children love both of their parents. Very often, children need "permission" from a parent to have a good relationship with the other parent. Encourage the children to have contact with the other parent. If a child complains about the other parent or the other parent's household, encourage them to discuss it with the other parent and let them know you are confident in their ability to work it out with the other parent. "Mom really loves you. I think you need to let her know this is bothering you. I'm confident that you two can work this out together." When parents speak negatively about a parent to a child or act disrespectfully toward that parent, the child will pick up on that behavior and attitude, and act it out with the other parent (and you). Help your child have love and respect for both parents.

**5. Help a child understand that Mommy and Daddy are getting a divorce, not Daddy (or Mommy) and the child.** Parenthood lasts a lifetime. Avoid language like "She left us."

**6. Act responsibly so children are secure in knowing a responsible adult is taking care**

of them. For example, responsible adults with a business-like relationship do not engage in name-calling, yelling, and other emotional outbursts. Another thing to remember is not to give children the responsibilities which belong to a parent. An example of this is leaving the determination of the time sharing schedule to a child. This puts the child in an awkward position. For one thing, it is too much responsibility for a child. And, a child should never be asked to choose between his or her parents. It is far better to seek a child's input and for the parents to then determine the time-sharing schedule. If when seeking input from a child, the child tells one parent one thing and the other another thing, this is a pretty clear indication that the child is experiencing a loyalty bind. This child may need to express him/herself to a neutral, supportive person like a counselor or teacher. Sometimes a child can talk with both parents together about his or her time-sharing preferences. This is easier to do with an older child. What needs to be made clear to the child is (1) we would like your input, (2) this is our decision, (3) please don't think you need to take sides or would hurt one of us by your thoughts or preferences, (4) it would hurt us more to think you felt you needed to protect us from your wishes.

**7. Do not ask a child to relay a message to the other parent.** This puts the child in the middle of the parents' relationship. It also places more responsibility on a child than is appropriate. Suppose the child forgets, or loses the letter? Suppose the other parent gets angry when they get the message? Who then suffers?

**8. Do not ask a child what is going on in the other parent's life or household.** This is asking a child to violate a trust. Don't grill children about how they spent their time when they come back from the other parent's home. The children can end up feeling like it wasn't okay that they had a good time. Remember, except in abusive situations, you cannot control what the other parent does with the child when they are having their time together. If you have concerns, express them to the other parent. If the child has concerns, encourage him or her to bring them up with the other parent. It might be tempting to agree with your child if s/he complains about the other parent, but you should tell the child to take his or her complaint to the other parent. You need to encourage the development of a healthy relationship with your child and the other parent.

**9. Let each household have its own rules.** If your children tell you the other parent lets them stay up very late, eat donuts for dinner, and therefore you should too, tell your children that they will follow your rules when with you and that you cannot tell the other parent what to do in their house.

**10. Do not use a child as a confidante or depend on a child for emotional support.** This is more responsibility than a child should have and also puts the child into a loyalty bind.

**11. Do not ask a child to keep a secret from the other parent.** This also puts the child into a loyalty bind. Do not agree with your child to keep a secret from the other parent. This undermines that parent's parenting role and cuts the parent out of significant events in the child's life.

**12. Do not discuss the financial or emotional details of the divorce (or problems with child support) with the children.** If they ask questions, ask them what their concerns are and then tell them that Mom and Dad will discuss them. Children need to know that their parents are working responsibly to resolve all the issues, and that they don't need to worry.

**13. Try to create as much stability and continuity between households as possible.** Following the same basic routines around bedtimes, mealtimes, and having similar expectations around discipline, training, homework, chores, hygiene, and diet will help children transition between households more easily.

**14. Give your children your time and attention.** It is normal to feel like you have to entertain your child when you have time with them after divorce, but you don't have to disrupt your life or spend a lot of money on them to make up for lost time. Be yourself and just have a good time together whether you're doing laundry or playing checkers.

**15. When you cannot see your child regularly, be creative and stay in active contact.** Telephone, write, e-mail, send postcards and pictures, make audiotapes of you reading their favorite stories, send them a video cassette of where you live, work, your pets, friends, etc. Arrange to read the same book, watch the same movie or tv show and then talk about it together. When the other parent is far away, videotape a child's softball game and send it to the other parent. Send the other parent copies of school projects, artwork, and funny things they said that week.

**16. Think of the other parent as an asset for your child and yourself.** Call the other parent when you need child care, a break, or when you think the child needs the other parent.

**17. Avoid trigger words like "I let you have the kids..." "My son...."** Think and speak in terms of "sharing our kids."

**18. Understand that sometimes a child will share exaggerated or fabricated information with the parent they are currently with.** This is a natural event and usually an effort to please that parent. The child may be motivated out of loyalty, concern for the parent's hurt feelings, wanting to gain favor with the parent, wanting to evoke a "mama-bear/papa-bear" response, and so on. The child is not lying but rather is attempting to survive, feel secure, diminish fears of abandonment, and create a positive relationship with the parent with whom s/he is sharing time.

**19. Post a timesharing schedule where the children can see it.** Even children as young as 12 months can follow along with a color-coded timesharing schedule where days with one parent are red, days with the other parent are blue, for example. They can even help "check off" the days as they go by and thereby know where they are in time and when they will see the other parent again.

**20. Be cautious about over-interpreting a child's reluctance at transition time.** Before

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becoming distressed at your child's seeming reluctance to transition to the other parent, take note as to whether the child is reluctant because she or he is seeking to avoid being with the other parent, wanting to have some control, demonstrating loyalty to you, or, as may often be the case, is the child having a fun time and just isn't ready to stop doing what they're doing and go.

**21. Focus on your future.** Divorced spouses do not permit themselves to get through the divorce transition when they are focused on the other parent and refuse to let go.

**22. Introduce the children to new partners very slowly.** It is not usually necessary for the children to meet a casual date or develop a relationship with a series of new partners. Children may experience separation loss and be confused about what "family" and "marriage" mean. Consider only introducing your children to a new partner after some form of commitment has been made between you and that new partner. Going slowly will also help the chances of the children building a positive relationship with that person. Children often have difficulty if they perceive themselves to be in competition with that new partner for your attention. During the introductory phases of helping the children adjust to your new relationship, have some one-on-one time with each of your children in addition to time you spend as a new family. Talk with your children about any concerns they may have. A key part of the children's acceptance of your new partner will be the reaction of the other parent. Find a time to discuss these issues with the other parent to avoid problems.

**23. Create developmentally appropriate time sharing plans.** Consider that children's desires and needs change over time. What a six month old and a ten year old can do and what they need are very different. In general, the following are important considerations in developing an age-appropriate time sharing plan:

**a. Children Under Three:**

i. Children under three are learning to trust others: They express their needs and someone comes to take care of their need. That person is a "primary caregiver" in the child's life. The child knows s/he can depend on that person to meet the child's needs. The child is learning if other people are trustworthy.

ii. When children are separated for long periods of time from someone they know to be dependable, and placed with someone who they do not yet know to be as dependable, they experience anxiety and insecurity. They learn not to trust their needs will be met.

iii. This concept is called attachment. It refers to the bond a child develops with his/her primary caregiver(s). Yes, a child can have more than one primary caregiver. It can be anyone who the child has learned will consistently and dependably respond to a cry for help. In terms of emotional development, it is critical that children form secure attachments with their primary caregivers.

iv. The attachment bonds formed in childhood have been shown to have a very strong impact on how we relate to others as adults especially in intimate relationships.

v. Children under three are developing their attachment bonds and need frequent contact with both parents and no prolonged separation from their primary caregiver(s).

vi. A parent can become a primary caregiver to a child with frequent contact, changing diapers, feeding, comforting, bathing, etc. It's not enough to just have time with the child; it must be nurturing, caretaking time.

**b. Children 3-5:**

i. Once children are passed their "attachment phase," more flexibility and longer blocks of time with each parent are possible.

ii. Children under five still need frequent contact with both parents because of their undeveloped sense of time.

iii. A posted, color-coded time-sharing calendar in both parents' households can be helpful to a child in this age group.

**c. Children 6-12 are usually the most flexible.**

i. If the schedule is workable for the parents, it will most likely be workable for the child. Children in this age group are somewhat like barometers of their parents' adjustment.

ii. Regardless of a child's age, a child should have a sense of being listened to in expressing their preferences for having time with both parents.

**d. Children 13 and up:**

i. Children in this age group usually prefer fewer transitions and longer blocks of time with parents,

ii. Or they may prefer to have one primary home and "make dates" to have time with the other parent. Don't let this hurt your feelings. As children grow older, their relationships with their friends are more important to them than their parents. Adolescents are creating an identity that is separate from their parents. They need to "roost" (which means "hang out in their space"). They also need to be easily available to their friends by phone.

## Biography

Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran, Ph.D.

1948 - 1998

Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran died of cancer on September 19, 1998. Kathleen was a nationally-recognized mediation practitioner and trainer, providing basic and advanced mediation, conflict resolution, and facilitation training as well as supervision, consultation, and internships. She was a Practitioner Member of the Academy of Family Mediators. Kathleen encouraged all whom she worked with in mediation to "do the right thing." She appealed to all of us to be our best and to give our children the love and support they need.

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