



Nicoletti-Flater Associates, PLLP

3595 S. Teller St. Suite 310 | Lakewood, CO. 80235

Ph: 303-989-1617 | Fax: 303-985-3133 | www.nicoletti-flater.com

Parenting After Divorce

By Dr. Sara Garrido

The research is clear that parental conflict is harmful to children, especially when children are caught in the middle of their parents' battles. Here are some simple things you can do to help children cope with some of the stress that may accompany divorce.

- Parents frequently ask what is and is not appropriate to tell their children. Our overall view is that "less is more". The less you tell them, the more they are prevented from undo stress. We don't recommend providing them with adult details about the reasons for the divorce as this might make them feel as if they need to side with one parent against the other parent. It is best to give them an age appropriate, general explanation, which can then be expanded upon over time as needed.
- Parents should communicate with each other rather than using the children to relay verbal or written messages. Think about the power-differential that is at play here. Your child has no authority and therefore should never be the "front-man" when it comes to communication between parents. If you, for whatever reason, cannot communicate directly with a co-parent, be sure to utilize someone with relatively equal authority/power to assist (a mediator, attorney, adult relative, etc.).
- Be careful not to discuss issues pertaining to the children if they are within hearing distance of either parent. Remember, children have "big ears" so keep this in mind when determining an appropriate time and place to engage in these discussions.
- Encourage children to speak openly and honestly with both parents. Asking them to keep secrets from the other parent or engaging with your child in making disparaging remarks about the other parent is not appropriate. Asking children to play "detective" and using them as a source of information about the other parent's personal life is equally inappropriate.
- Co-parenting requires two complete homes for the kids. Children should not be required to keep favorite items at one house only because "I bought it for you, not mom/dad." Keep in mind, the children didn't choose this situation yet they are the ones having to make the transition. Ensure that they have a complete set of necessities (clothes, toiletries, etc.) at each house along with items for down-time/entertainment. Allowing for resentment/stress to build because one house is not set up to make them comfortable and externalizing responsibility for this onto the other parent by saying it is their responsibility to provide for them ultimately serves only to hurt the children. Do everything in your power to make the children's environment comfortable.
- It would be unusual for two parents to have exactly the same parenting styles. Parents will likely have legitimate differences around issues of bedtimes, food, TV, discipline, and risk tolerance. Cooperative parenting requires that each parent resist the temptation to criticize the other parent's parenting unless there is a serious danger to the child. The cost of the criticism and the predictable defense and counter criticism usually exceeds by far whatever benefits are sought in the first place. Children need their parents to be at peace so biting one's tongue and having reasonable expectations of the other parent is



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important.

- How well a parent's new mate is integrated into children's lives is frequently determined by the attitude of the children and the attitude of the other parent. Parents should accept that their children first need time to adjust to their parents living separately. This takes time and new dating partners should not be introduced until children have emotionally, behaviorally, and psychologically adjusted to the divorce. If months have passed since the divorce is finalized and your child is still struggling, seek outside support for them rather than go with a "get over it and move on" attitude. A new mate should be introduced slowly, giving the children time to adjust to their presence. Each parent should encourage the children to show respect to the new partner. Although it may be understandable that the ex struggles with the presence of a new mate being around their children, those feelings must be managed and not shared with the children.
- Most everyone has had the experience of successfully doing business with someone they don't like. The skills and strategies that one uses in order to do so include:
 - Sticking to the business at hand
 - Taking one issue at a time
 - Attempting to compromise where appropriate
 - Focusing on the present and future rather than the past
 - Leaving out intense emotions
 - Listening carefully

Even if you don't particularly like your children's other parent, you still have to do business together. While you are no longer together as mates, you are partners in the parenting of your children and will be for the rest of your lives. By utilizing the skills and strategies described above, you can maintain, at a minimum, a business-like relationship with each other.

Recommended Reading:

[Mom's House, Dad's House](#) by Isolina Ricci