

# Helping Your Child Survive a Difficult Divorce

*A Psychologist Who has Dealt with the Pain  
of Many Children Whose Parents Act Irrationally During Divorce Tells It Like  
It Is!*

*Lynne Namka, Ed.D 2000*

It is tough to be a child of divorced parents. It is absolutely terrifying to be the child of divorced parents who are at war with each other! Divorce hurts. It is a terrible thing to have happen to a family. Everyone gets hurt, but children remain scarred for years when parents continue the war. Research shows that negative behaviors from parents act after a divorce can cause more problems to a child than the divorce itself.

There are three ways of acting that divorcing parents can make. These three ways of acting during and after a divorce are (1.) Argumentative, (2.) Disengagement, (3.) Cooperating. The type of arrangement that you engage in, is directly related to the level of your maturity.

People who are getting divorced often try to control the person they are divorcing. Rationally, this makes no sense. If you couldn't change your spouse when you were married to them, there is no way you can force change on them now. You can't win by demanding, yelling or saying bad things about your ex. Anger only escalates the conflict in the situation and then both sides dig their heels in and the child loses.

Patricia Evans in her important book *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, says that verbal abusers often have had an insecure childhood that created an unhealthy (sometimes abnormal) need to control others. OR they were spoiled when they were young and continue to think that everything should go their way. Evans says people who yell and scream at others really don't have their own personal power. So the abuser avoids feelings of powerlessness by trying to dominate and control others.

Do not let your child be a witness to your anger at his or her other parent. Belittling your child's mother or father is a form of child abuse that can affect your child's self esteem permanently. Your child is half of the other parent. If you criticize your ex, your child will feel ashamed of half of him or herself. You WILL hurt your child if you habitually yell at your ex, trash talk about them, if you are self righteous in explaining how wrong their point of view is or if you try to evade the legal custody arrangement.

Often, the greater a person's sense of guilt about how they have acted in the marriage or during the divorce, the greater their need to cast blame on others and not take responsibility for their own behavior. So look to your own motives if you act out your anger by blaming your ex.

Screaming, taunting, cursing and calling others names or making threats are all verbal abuse! If you habitually yell, threaten, tell the other that he or she is wrong and call them dumb, stupid, that is abuse! If you twist things around, try to have the last word, pick fights and look for the wrong in everything your ex spouse does to start arguments or threaten to go back to court frequently over small things, guess what? You are a verbal abuser.

In bad mouthing your ex, you add to their stress and parental stress deeply effects the harmony of your child. Being a single parent is hard. If you think of the best interests of your child, you will want to support your ex spouse emotionally, rather than create more stress for them. The more you keep your anger in check, the better off your child will be.

Engaging in inappropriate verbal behavior comes down to being ego invested that you are right. It often is based on the egotistical idea that you are so unique a person that the rules of basic kindness which apply to others shouldn't apply to you, especially where your ex spouse is concerned. The rules of kindness always apply even though your former spouse may be angry, manipulative, or downright mean. Keep your integrity by refusing to stoop to a low level. Find safe outlets for your anger. If you can't control your anger when you talk to your ex about visitation arrangements by yourself, take an anger management class.

### **Denial of Your Immature Behavior Only Perpetuates the Problem**

If you think you aren't hurting your child when you rag about their other parent, you are in denial. Keep a check on how you deny your inappropriate behavior. Denial distorts reality by seeing all the wrong your ex does, while telling yourself that your behavior is impeccable. You may minimize and ignore the damage that your actions cause your child. You may rationalize actions and make excuses for your bad behavior. Rationalizing is always lying to yourself. Energy is put in to justifying your behavior instead of seeking solutions to help your child deal with one of the greatest losses he or she will ever face--the intact family.

Any time you blame anyone other than yourself for your anger, that is denial, for sure. Denial of your own anger is a way of lying to yourself. Lying can become more and more practiced until you can convince yourself that you are blameless. Convincing yourself of how bad the other parent is, always backfires on you and damages your child. Your child is a little pitcher with big ears who takes everything he hears in. In addition, you teach your child that not only do marriages end, but it is okay for people who used to love each other to treat each other badly.

Anything that you say that follows the word "but" is frequently denial. (I didn't mean to yell at him, but he made me so mad.) When you are unwilling to look at what you are doing because you fear finding out you are wrong, that is denial. The only cure for denial is to give up the lies and admit to yourself the reality of the harm your child faces. Divorce is hard enough for the child, don't add parental immaturity to what your child has already suffered.

### **Dos and Don'ts for Parents Behaving Badly**

So, it is grow up time! Maturity is dealing with custody issues and creating happy transitions between the two homes. Your child will "win" after a divorce if he is given the best of both worlds--mom's house and dad's house. This is the best gift you can give your child who is hurting and confused because his basic security has been threatened.

\* If you want to do something invaluable for your child, create a positive relationship with your ex. If you can't be positive, at least be civil. Remaining civil, in the face of great anger, shows that you are being mature. Someday when your child is grown, they will thank you for keeping a cool head during the difficult times.

\* Never discuss your ex with your child. Do not talk about your ex when your child can overhear it. Your child wants to be loyal to both mom and dad. Hearing one parent trash the

other sets up confusion and not knowing what to believe. If what you say is inaccurate, based on your feelings of hurt and betrayal, your child will eventually figure it out and distance from you. Children bond with parents with whom they feel safe. Your child will not feel safe to talk about unhappy feelings if you are bashing his or her mother or dad.

\* Do not ask your child to carry messages between you and your ex. That puts the child in the middle and creates confusion. Work out some amiable way of discussing situations with your ex. Be the bigger person and insist on being straight forward to calm things between you and your ex.

\* Stop thinking of your former spouse as your ex-wife or ex-husband. Think of them as the mother of your child or the father of your child. Your new relationship with them is to become the best parents of the child or children that you have created together. You have a responsibility to find ways to develop a working relationship with them to co-parent your child. That is your new job description.

\* Remember, you chose this person to be the mother or father of your child. There must have been good points for you to choose them for this most important role. Think back and focus on the good aspects of your former spouse. Look for ways that they are being an effective parent. Keep your mind on their positive points, not on what they are doing wrong.

\* Stop thinking about the money or visitation issues and how unfairly you have it. What is, is. If you don't like your reality about the settlement, do something about it. Either go back to court and get it changed or let it go. Put up or shut up. No matter how bad or rotten you now think your ex is, no matter how bad and rotten your ex may actually be, you make it worse by dwelling on it. Dwelling on unfairness only makes you miserable and blocks your ability to move ahead in life. Children deserve a parent who isn't always bent out of shape because he or she doesn't like the legal arrangements.

\* Don't ask your child about what the other parent does. It is none of your business and may signal some hidden jealousy on your part. Don't check up on them or feel that you have a right to make judgments about what he or she is doing. Divorce took away that right. Having to report on or answer questions about the absent mother or father puts your child in a lose-lose scene. Grilling your child will backfire on you--you will lose his or her trust.

\* Your ex's decisions and behavior are totally their own responsibility unless, of course, your child is placed in a harmful situation. Then you are obliged to speak up. Do a reality check with a neutral third party to see if there is actual harm to your child or you are just upset. If your child complains about small ways he is being treated by your ex, and your ex is unable to hear you, tell your child that he must address it with that parent. You can't troubleshoot for him in this situation. If he can't speak up, get him into counseling so that he can become more assertive or at least learn to deal with the situation.

\* Stop and think of each demand that you make on the mother or father of your child and the direct consequences it will have on your child. Follow visitation times to the letter. Not following the legal arrangements or asking to change visitation dates only causes more conflict for your child.

\* You play games with your child's mind if you do not show up on time or not at all or if you do not bring your child home at the agreed upon time. Your child will keep score on this. Some children sit by the window for hours waiting for a parent who doesn't show up. They

may pretend they don't care, but they will feel abandoned if you don't keep your word. Their anger about being lied to may take years to surface, but it will come out at you at some time in the future. Your lifelong relationship with your child is at stake. Do what you say you will do. You brought this child into the world and now you have a responsibility to be the grownup and a stable parent.

\* If your new love interest or partner is insecure, he or she may intensify the bad situation by adding fuel to the flame. Be wary about their agenda if they initiate anger related discussions with you on a regular basis about the unfairness of your ex spouse. You probably feel hurt and betrayed enough which leads to your becoming angrier. A more mature partner will support your decisions about custody but will not become overly emotionally involved fueling your anger so that the situation actually get worse.

Taking your hurt and anger out on your ex-spouse WILL damage your child. How you deal with your ex is another indicator of your self-esteem and maturity. If you are raging, then you have lots of problems to work out. If you blow it and act out with anger, apologize to your ex and to your child. Then make a resolution to better in the future. Keep working at keeping your temper under control You don't have to be a jerk where the parent of your child is concerned. You don't have to be a jerk in any situation. Acting like a jerk is your choice--let your conscience be your guide, not your righteous indignation.

### **Letting Go of the Past and Moving On to Your New Life**

If a lot of your energy is going to fighting your ex, instead of getting on with your life, you have a serious problem. Swallow your pride and break into any denial about how your angry acting out does not hurt your child. If your conflict with your ex spouse causes problems in your new relationship, get help. If you and your new love can't get it together on discipline, take a step parenting class or at least read some books on step parenting. If you can't work out your frustration on your own, get help. If you have been trying to calm your anger, but it's not working, that's a signal you need someone to help you get a handle on it.

Use your anger to make a positive difference in your future. Anger is a momentum which gives energy for change. Use it to get off dead center and invest it in making a difference. Go to Divorce Recovery classes or anger management counseling.

You only get one chance in the raising of your child. The childhood years cannot be taken back and redone. If you blow it, your child suffers for life! Professional help is available. There are agencies that have a sliding scale for counseling to fit your circumstances. Even if it costs some money, get help. Money is not the object here. Your child's success in life is the important thing. You are worth it. Your kids are worth it.

Make your goal to get a working relationship with the other parent of your child. If you are willing to see how your angry actions affect your child and do something about it, your child has the best chance for a happy future. The pain of the divorce can start to heal for everyone. Your life will become happier and get back on even keel, Remember, the best revenge for the misery of divorce is making a good life for yourself! And your child will be the better for your investment in his and your future.

### **The Book of Rights of a Child in a Divorce**

- To be told that my mother and father still love me and will never divorce me.

- To be told that the divorce is not my fault and not to be told about the adult problems that caused it.
- To be treated as a human being---not as another piece of property to be fought over, bargained over or threatened.
- To have decisions about me based on my best interest, rather than past wrongs, hurt feelings, or parent's needs.
- To love both my parents without being forced to choose or feel guilty.
- To know both my parents through regular, frequent involvement in my life.
- To have the financial support of both my father and mother.
- To be spared hearing bad hurtful comments about either of my parents which have no useful purpose.
- Not to be asked to tell a lie or act as a spy or messenger.
- To be allowed to care about others without having to choose or feel guilty.

### **Helpful Resources for Parents**

One of the best books on getting along with your ex spouse is Mom's House, Dad's House: A Complete Guide For Parents Who Are Separated, Divorced Or Remarried by Isolina Ricci.

Do a reality check on yourself by reading The Verbally Abusive Relationship by Patricia Evans.

Check out these web pages regarding the effects of divorce on children. Also do a web search on "divorce" to find other helpful pages.

See our own award-winning web pages on anger management at <http://AngriesOut.com>

MEDSCAPE - PEDIATRIC NEWS: Avoiding Post-divorce Pitfalls That Damage Children <http://news.medscape.com/IMNG/PediatricNews/1999/v33.n07/ped3307.28.01.html>  
Predictors of successful adolescent development after divorce include repartnering of the custodial parent and time with the noncustodial parent. (To access the article you will have to register with Medscape. Registration is free.)

AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION: Frequently Asked Questions in Marriage and Family Counseling [http://www.counseling.org/enews/volume\\_1/0107a.htm](http://www.counseling.org/enews/volume_1/0107a.htm) Legal and ethical questions are given in counseling clients involved in divorce or custody proceedings.

JOURNAL OF FAMILY PSYCHOLOGY: Delinquent Behavior, Future Divorce or Nonmarital Childbearing, and Externalizing Behavior Among Offspring: This 14 year study concludes that parents' personal behavior and personality have a greater impact on their children's behavior than the parents' marital status!  
<http://www.apa.org/journals/fam/fam134568.html>

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY: Making Custody Agreements Work. <http://www.aamft.org/families/Making%20Custody.htm> Ideas to help families structure custody agreements that will encourage connections to the absent parent.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY: Divorce Matters: Talking With Your Child's Other Parent . A good handout for divorcing parents. <http://www.exnet.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1640.pdf>