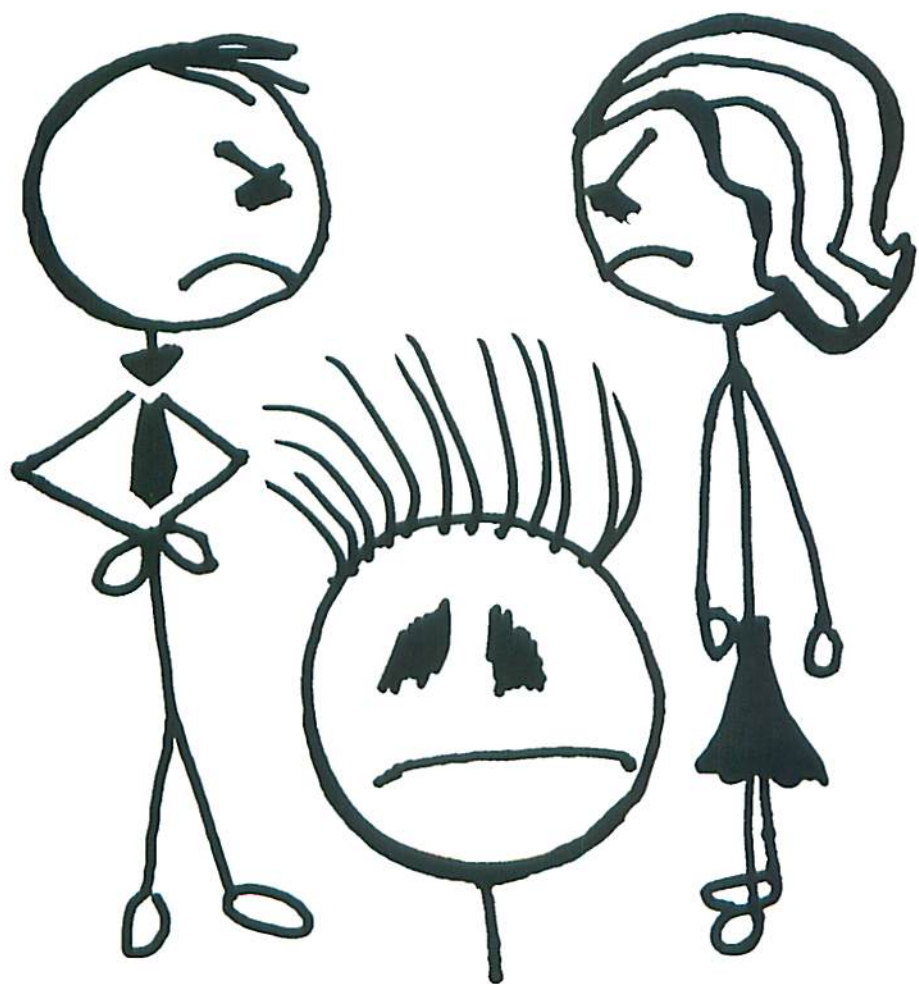


# Stepping Back From Anger

Protecting Your Children During Divorce



*American Academy  
of Matrimonial Lawyers*

Every year, more than 1 million American couples get divorced. For those men and women, it is often the most grueling, emotionally exhausting, and expensive experience they will ever have.

For their children, it can be even worse.

Imagine you are six, and suddenly the only people you have ever relied on for food, shelter, and love are at each other's throats.

In your young mind, you conclude that you are the cause of their anger, and that you might get lost in the shuffle. Before you know



it, you think to yourself, there won't be anybody left to scare off the closet monsters.

To make matters worse, you often find yourself alone in your anguish, as the two people you usually go to for solace – your parents – are too wrapped up in their own anger and grief to be of much help.

It is unsettling, to say the least.

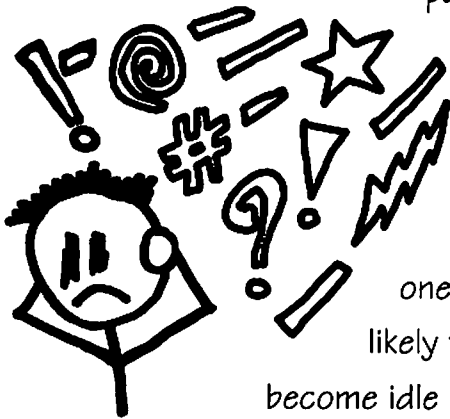
As parents, it is not enough to assume that your children will bounce back once the legal machinations of divorce are through. Though many adults find their

post-divorce lives are vastly better than their pre-divorce lives, for many children, that is not the case.

Divorce makes its mark on children both in the short-term and the long-term. Young children whose parents are divorcing often suffer from depression, sleep disorders, loss of self-esteem, poor academic performance, behavioral regression, and a host of other physical and emotional disorders.



Long after the divorce is final, children of divorce often have trouble entering into committed relationships of their own, fearing their relationships will end as their parents' did.



In addition, a Princeton University study showed that children who live apart from one of their parents are more likely to drop out of school, become idle (neither be in school nor

have a job), and have a child before reaching 20, than children who live with both parents. Other studies have made similar findings, concluding that the effects of divorce on children are pervasive and insidious.

# Ten Tips for Divorcing Parents



Divorce is never easy on kids, but there are many ways parents can help lessen the impact of their break-up on their children:

**Never disparage your former spouse in front of your children.** Because children know they are “part mom” and “part dad,” the criticism can batter the child’s self-esteem.

**Do not use your children as messengers between you and your former spouse.** The less the children feel a part of the battle between their parents, the better.

**Reassure your children that they are loved and that the divorce is not their fault.** Many children assume that they are to blame for their parents’ hostility.

**Encourage your children to see your former spouse frequently.** Do everything within your power to accommodate the visitation.

**At every step during your divorce, remind yourself that your children’s interests – not yours – are paramount, and act accordingly.** Lavish them with love at each opportunity.

**Your children may be tempted to act as your caretaker. Resist the temptation to let them.** Let your peers, adult family members, and mental health professionals be your counselors and sounding board. Let your children be children.

**If you have a drinking or drug problem, get counseling right away.** An impairment inhibits your ability to reassure your children and give them the attention they need at this difficult time.

**If you are the non-custodial parent, pay your child support.** The loss of income facing many children after divorce puts them at a financial disadvantage that has a pervasive effect on the rest of their lives.

**If you are the custodial parent and you are not receiving child support, do not tell your children.** It feeds into the child’s sense of abandonment and further erodes his or her stability.

**If at all possible, do not uproot your children.** Stability in their residence and school life helps buffer children from the trauma of their parents’ divorce.

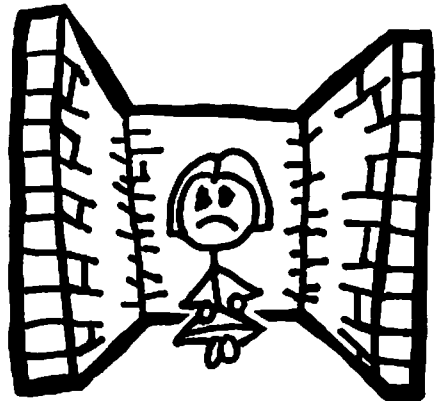
These sad facts make it imperative that divorcing parents put their children before their legal battles. This often means that two people who find it difficult to be in the same room without screaming at each other will have to calmly, deliberately, and most of all, lovingly, make joint decisions about their children's well-being.

While it may mean suppressing their anger at a cheating or neglectful spouse, the winner, in the long run, is the children.

The stakes are obviously quite high.

Roughly one-third of the children of divorce lose contact with one of their parents, depriving them of years of adult guidance, support and love. But even many of those who remain in touch with both parents are not any better off, as they continue to be tormented for years by their parents' continual arguing.

And the longer the parental conflict continues, the more serious is the psychological damage to the child. Many children respond to such stress by turning off their feelings and walling up their emotions. Those children are not only deprived of the



joys of childhood, but they often find themselves emotionally adrift as adults.

It's important for parents to remember that their actions during their divorce can have long-term consequences they might not intend. A mother who forbids her daughter from seeing her adulterous father, for instance, is laying the groundwork for her daughter to be distrustful of all men, thus potentially sabotaging the child's intimate adult relationships.



Parents must also realize that children often interpret anger between spouses as anger at the children. That is because children are aware, even at an early age, that they are “part mommy” and “part daddy.” When divorcing couples disparage each other in



their children's presence, their developing self-esteem can take a battering.

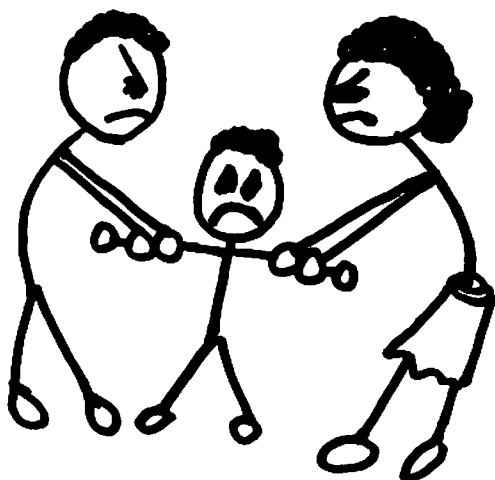
Though divorce is never easy on children, such crises are often opportunities in disguise. Because a child's emotional health after his parents' divorce is so dependent on his parents' behavior during the divorce, the separation process is a good time for parents to reflect on their children's well-being and, if necessary,

seek out professional help for themselves and their children.

It may even be necessary for children to spend some time alone with a counselor who might detect hidden messages in a child's artwork or storytelling.

Avoiding a custody fight is one of the most important things parents can do to ensure their children's well-being

after divorce. But even children whose parents are not fighting over custody can also be wounded by the anger being vented between both



parents, and should be spared from that as much as possible.

*(See "Ten Tips for Divorcing Parents" and "Children's Bill of Rights".)*

Helping children heal begins before any legal papers are filed, with how and when parents tell their children about their decision to break up.

The first words children hear about the divorce

# Children's Bill of Rights

Every kid should know he or she has rights, particularly when their mom and dad are splitting up. Below are some things parents shouldn't forget – and kids shouldn't let them – when the family is in the midst of a break-up.

**You have the right to love both your parents.**

And you have the right to be loved by both of them. That means you shouldn't feel guilty about wanting to see your dad or your mom at any time. It's important for you to have both parents in your life, particularly during difficult times, such as a divorce.

**You do not have to choose one parent over the other.**

If you have an opinion about what parent you want to live with, let it be known. But nobody can force you to make that choice. If your parents can't work it out, a judge may make the decision for them.

**You're entitled to all the feelings you're having.**

Don't be embarrassed by what you're feeling. It's scary when your parents break up, and you're allowed to be scared. Or angry. Or sad. Or whatever.

**You have the right to be in a safe environment.**

This means that nobody is allowed to put you in danger, either physically or emotionally. If one of your parents is hurting you, tell someone – either your other parent or a trusted adult, like a teacher.

**You don't belong in the middle of your parents' break-up.**

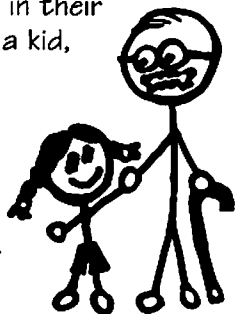
Sometimes your parents may get so caught up in their own problems that they forget that you're just a kid, and that you can't handle their adult worries.

**Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are still part of your life.**

Even if you're living with one parent, you can still see relatives on your other parent's side. You'll always be a part of their lives, even if your parents aren't together anymore.

**You have the right to be a child.**

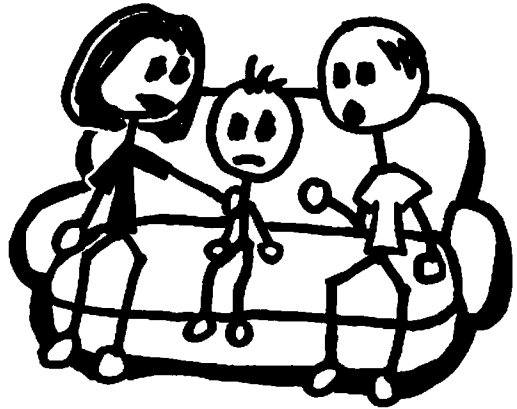
Kids shouldn't worry about adult problems. Concentrate on your school work, your friends, activities, etc. Your mom and dad just need your love. They can handle the rest.





should be from their parents, as soon after the decision is made as possible. It is best not to wait until one parent has already moved out of the house.

Ideally, both parents should be there when the children are told. If the children are roughly the same age, they should be told at the same time. If there is a wide age difference, it can be useful to tell them together, and then have separate meetings with the children individually, adapting each explanation to each child's level of understanding.



When informing children of an impending divorce, parents should not divulge such details as infidelity or sexual deprivation, and they should not blame one parent or another. One possible approach is to present the divorce as a solution to the family's problems, an end to the fighting and tension that have filled the home with anger.

Honesty is a crucial element in informing children of the split. They should be told that their lives will change, and that some things, like spending time with the

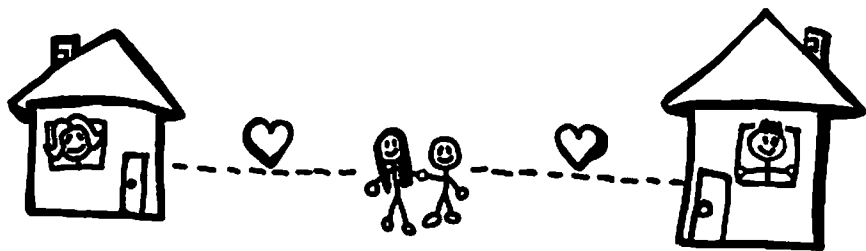
parent they're not living with most of the time, will be harder.

Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings, either with their parents, their friends, or a counselor.

It is best that parents not ask their children to choose with which parent they would like to live. If they have an opinion on the matter, it will likely come out unprompted. If they do not, they should not be put in a position of choosing between one parent and another.

One custody option to consider is some form of joint parenting (depending on state laws). It may allow both parents an equal say in decision-making on the child's behalf, even if physical custody of the child may not be 50/50.

Although sharing parenthood so intimately with a former (marriage) partner can be difficult, co-parenting is one of the best ways parents can show their love for their child.



Most children – in fact, most adults – still dream of being part of a Rockwellian family, with a mommy and a daddy, several happy children, and a dog, all living blissfully under one roof. But as the American divorce rate skyrockets, that dream is becoming a reality for fewer and fewer families.

In its place, for both parents and children, are opportunities. By stepping back from their own anger, divorcing parents can move closer to what should be a common goal for their children – maintaining a nurturing environment and minimizing the potentially traumatic byproducts of the so-called “broken home.”



*This article and the “Ten Tips for Divorcing Parents” were written by Mike McCurley, 1998 president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. The “Children’s Bill of Rights” was written by the AAML’s Special Concerns of Children Committee.*

# Resources for Divorcing Families

## **American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers**

150 N. Michigan Ave  
Suite 2040  
Chicago IL 60601  
312-263-6477

<http://www.aaml.org>  
(For assistance in locating a family lawyer in your area)

## **American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy**

1133 15th St. NW  
Suite 300  
Washington DC 20005  
202-452-0109

<http://www.aamft.org>  
(Listings of marriage and family therapists nationwide. If your area does not have a chapter, call your state's psychological association)

## **Association of Family and Conciliation Courts**

329 W. Wilson St  
Madison WI 53703  
608-251-4001

(Publishes a brochure on joint custody)

## **Academy of Family Mediators**

5 Militia Drive  
Lexington MA 02173  
781-674-2663

<http://www.igc.apc.org/afm/>  
(For assistance in locating a family mediator in your area)

## **Children's Rights Council**

300 "Eye" Street NE  
Suite 401  
Washington DC 20002  
202-547-6227

<http://www.vix.com/crc>  
(Local chapters deal with custody issues and divorce reform)

## **National Association of Social Workers**

750 First Street NE  
Suite 700  
Washington DC 20002  
202-408-8600

<http://www.socialworkers.org>  
(Referral service of social workers who provide family counseling and/or mediation)

## **Parents Without Partners**

401 N. Michigan Ave  
Chicago IL 60611  
1-800-637-7974

<http://www.parentswithoutpartners.org>  
(Referral source to 400+ local chapters)

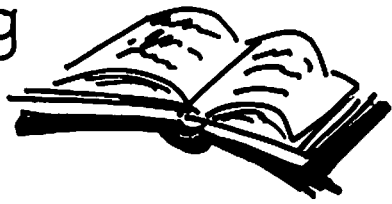
## **Stepfamily Association of America, Inc.**

650 J. Street  
Suite 205  
Lincoln NE 68508  
800-735-0329

<http://www.stepfam.org>  
(Publishes a quarterly bulletin and a booklet of educational resources for stepfamilies)



# Suggested Reading



## On Divorce

*Divorce Manual, A Client Handbook*,  
by AAML, 1993.

*The Divorce Handbook*, by James T. Friedman,  
Random House, 1998.

*Divided Families*, by Frank Furstenberg and Andrew J. Cherlin,  
Harvard University Press, 1994.

*Growing Up With Divorce*, by Neil Kalter, Fawcett, 1991.

*Vicki Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents*, by Vicki Lansky,  
Book Peddlers, 1996.

*Mom's House, Dad's House*, by Isolina Ricci. Fireside, 1997.

*Second Chances*, by Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee,  
Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996.

## About Parenting and Divorce

*The Single Mother's Book*, by Joan Anderson, Peachtree Publishers, 1990.

*Families Apart*, by Melinda Blau, Perigree, 1995.

*Mothers on Trial*, by Phyllis Chesler, Harcourt Brace, 1991.

*Dividing the Child*, by Eleanor MacCoby and Robert H. Mnookin,  
Harvard University Press, 1994.

*101 Ways to Be a Long Distance Super-Dad – or Mom, Too!*,  
by George Newman, R&E Publishers, 1996.

*The Custody Revolution*, by Richard A. Warshak, Poseidon Press, 1992.

## Books for Children about Divorce

*Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids*, by Michael S. Prokop,  
Alegra House Pubs., 1996.

*At Daddy's on Saturdays*, by Linda Walvoord Girard,  
Albert Whitman & Co., 1991.

*Dinosaurs Divorce*, by Marc Tolon Brown and Laurence Krasny Brown,  
Little Brown & Co., 1988.

*Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore*, by Nancy Lou Reynolds  
(Illustrator) and Kathy Stinson, Firefly Books, 1988.

*How It Feels When Parents Divorce*, by Jill Krementz, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

*The Kids' Book of Divorce*, Eric Rofes, editor, Random House, 1982.

*It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear*, by Vicki Lansky, Book Peddlers, 1998.

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