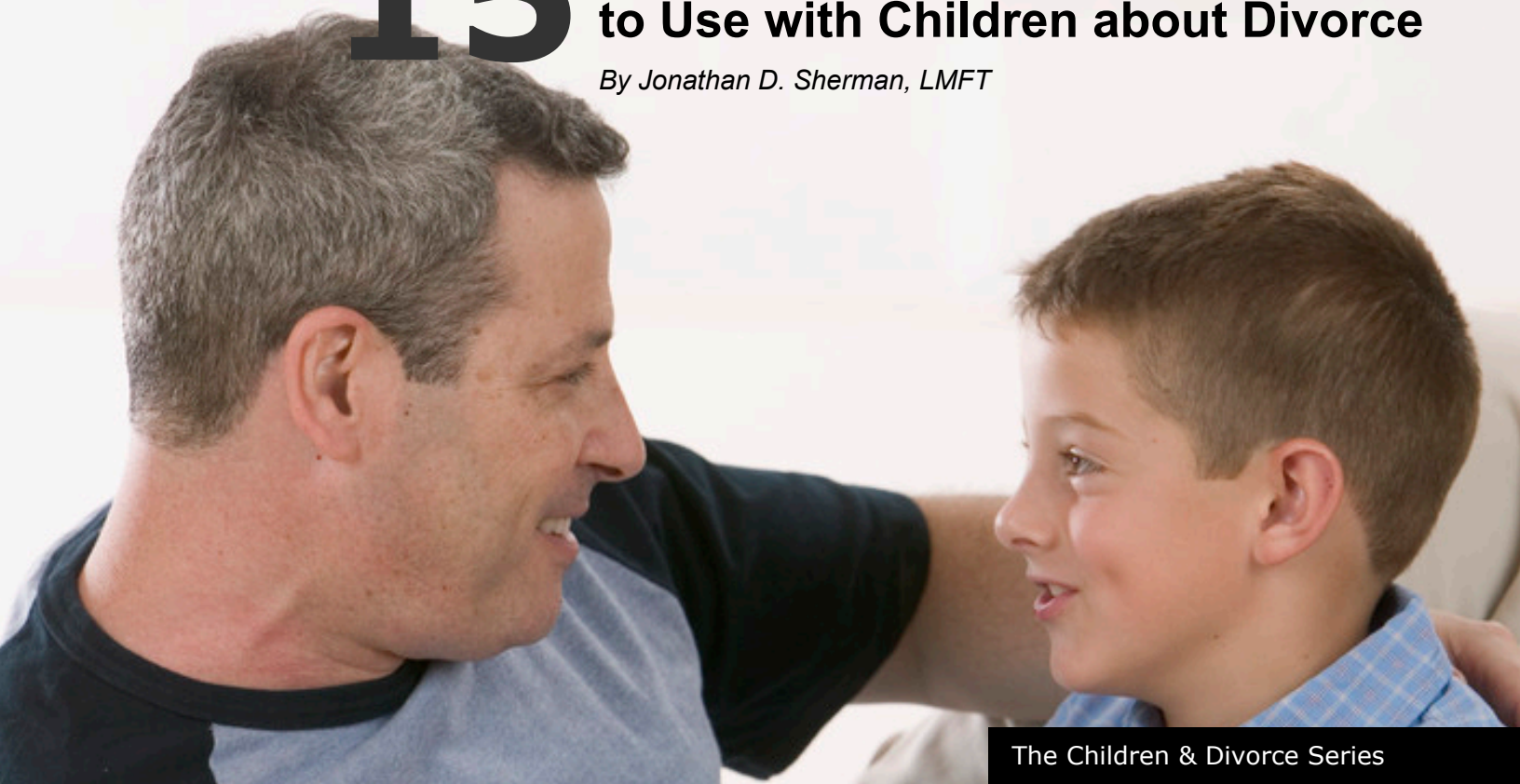


15 Important COMMUNICATION SKILLS to Use with Children about Divorce

By Jonathan D. Sherman, LMFT



The Children & Divorce Series

For 11 years I taught the State of Utah's Divorce Education Course for Parents and have been counseling families even longer.

Divorce is difficult for both parents and children, and unfortunately, all too common. Many parents go through divorce uninformed, scared and frustrated because they don't know how to navigate all the perplexing and confusing aspects of divorce.

The biggest concern most parents face is how divorce will impact their children. Over the years, many parents have asked me how to best help their children through this difficult time. Thus, I will begin, with this article, a Children and

Divorce Series to share some of my answers to this important topic.

First of all, children need to hear the truth about the divorce. The unknown frightens them more than the known, however unpleasant it may be.

Children are naturally self-centered. They worry first about how the divorce will affect them. Parents need to tell their children clearly about how things will be after the separation and to assure children that they will be cared for, protected, and loved by both parents. Children need to know why the divorce is occurring so they don't blame themselves.

Parents should select their words carefully. They need to speak in language appropriate to their children's level of understanding. Parents need to be honest about the pain that's involved. The following are suggestions for talking to children about divorce:

1. Don't pretend it's unimportant or make light of the divorce. It might ease your guilt to think you won't upset your kids, but news of their parents' divorce is serious information to them, and you will confuse them by not treating it seriously.
2. For children who are not familiar with the word, divorce, explain that divorce

means that one parent will be moving out of their home and each parent will live in a separate home. They may also need explanations of the words lawyer, custody, divorce stipulation, and going to court.

3. Explain what will concern the children most – their future living arrangements. Tell them as much as you can about where they will live, where the departing parent will live, and when they will spend time with each parent.
4. If you know you will be offering your children two homes in shared parenting arrangement, let them know this. But don't imagine that this is a positive point when you present the idea.
5. Explain the details you know about expected changes. Be honest about conflicts, but don't elaborate on those that may cause anxiety, such as money.
6. Let your children know that there are many different kinds of loving. The feelings between a man and woman are not the same as the

feelings as a parent has for a child, even though we use the word love to describe both.

7. Be honest, but don't make excuses for the other parent in order to minimize a child's pain. Just as it is important not to attack the other parent, don't err in the other direction by covering for that parent.
8. Explain that you and their other parent cannot live together any longer, but that your separating is in no way the fault of any child.
9. Don't lie to your children. The truth often comes out eventually and they will resent you for hiding it. You risk losing their trust and could damage their trust for adults in general.
10. Let the children know they will be kept informed about changes that concern them. If there is the possibility of a major change, such as a move or change of school, they'll need to know.
11. Avoid blaming your spouse for the dissolution of your

marriage and home life in front of the children.

12. Let your children hear of your love for them. And, most important, let them know you wish that their love the other parent will continue and can grow.
13. Don't make promises you can't keep.
14. If one parent has concrete plans to move in with a lover, the children's living options will obviously be affected. It's best to answer truthfully rather than risk loss of trust by avoiding the subject.
15. Give a reason for your divorce. Children need to know why the divorce is occurring so they don't blame themselves. Be sensitive to their ages, development level, and cognitive abilities. You might not yet truly understand the real reasons for your own divorce. Often these only reveal themselves with time. The apparent reasons or the symptomatic reasons will do as an explanation for now.



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Benefits of COOPERATIVE PARENTING in Divorce

By Jonathan D. Sherman, LMFT

The Children & Divorce Series

This article is the second in a Children and Divorce Series to share some of my answers to this important topic. For 11 years I taught the State of Utah's Divorce Education Course for Parents.

Divorce is difficult for both parents and children, and unfortunately, all too common. Many parents go through divorce uninformed, scared and frustrated because they don't know how to navigate all the perplexing and confusing aspects of divorce. The biggest concern most parents face is how divorce will impact their children. Over the years, many parents have asked me how to best help their children through this difficult time.

Children benefit when their parents demonstrate cooperative behavior with an ex-spouse

Parents who cooperate will help their children move through the healing process and more successfully adjust to the changes brought about by their parents' divorce.

Unfortunately parents who are consumed by their own difficulties, and who do not model cooperative behavior with an ex-spouse, unintentionally display that they are insensitive to their children's pain and confusion.

For children, attacking a child's parent is the same as

attacking the child. As one 10-year-old boy said to me, "Jonathan, when my mom and dad call each other names, it would hurt a lot less if they just punched me in the nose."

When parents do not cooperate, and instead engage in a conflictual relationship, they are likely to harm their children by causing:

- Tension, anxiety, and regression;
- Feelings of confusion and embarrassment;
- Feelings of responsibility and self-blame in children;
- Withdrawal or clinging behavior at transitions;
- Long-term emotional and behavioral wounds;

- Feelings of disillusionment, fear, insecurity, or vulnerability; and
- Temper tantrums school problems or self-destructive behaviors

For the sake of the children, parents need to strive to make the divorce work well. Relationships between former spouses need redefining.

Ideally, parents learn to give one another the benefit of the doubt and to trust the other parent in certain situations because they share a joint goal – to provide the best lives they can for their children. One spouse may act unreasonable or irresponsible, but this individual probably has good qualities. These qualities may no longer be apparent but are usually available to the children.

Cooperative co-parenting guidelines include:

- Develop a new kind of language that is nonjudgmental, factual, and neutral;
- Stick to the topic in discussions;
- Discuss money issues and parenting issues in separate phone calls;
- Avoid blaming when problems arise;
- Keep the transfer of children free of conflict; and
- Don't look for opportunities to make the ex-spouse look bad.



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5 STAGES OF THE GRIEVING PROCESS for Children in Divorce

By Jonathan D. Sherman, LMFT



The Children & Divorce Series

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Divorce is difficult for both parents and children, and unfortunately, all too common. Many parents go through divorce uninformed, scared and frustrated because they don't know how to navigate all the perplexing and confusing aspects of divorce. The more you know the more you can help your children. In this

article we will explore the grieving process children go through. Understanding this and helping your children understand this can give place and voice to what they are feeling and thinking.

A grieving process takes place when a divorce occurs

Grieving takes place in all our lives any time there is a major change in our lives. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross outlined the grieving process, which adults and children go through when they successfully mourn a significant loss. This same grieving process occurs when families go through a divorce.

The stages of grief do not occur in a simple step-by-step

progression but rather the stages encompass an emotional process, which is more circular. The stages of grief are:

1. Shock and denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining/Guilt
4. Sadness/Depression
5. Acceptance

Divorce is much like a death for those involved. It is the loss of a lifestyle, the loss of having both parents in the same house, a fear about the future relationship with each parent, a change in daily routines, and so forth.

1. Shock and denial

Depending on the kind of divorce parents are

experiencing, children will experience varying degrees of shock and denial. Denial allows a child to get used to the idea a little bit at a time and protects them from the immediate impact of the trauma. Children may say things like: "This can't be happening to me" or, "There has been fighting before, but my parents will get back together again".

2. Anger

Beneath the feeling of anger is usually a myriad of other feelings such as fear, jealousy, frustration, hurt feelings, and embarrassment. In order for your child to learn to cope with anger, it is important for parents to learn to cope with anger in an appropriate way.

The child may blame one or the other parent, and small stressors may erupt into full-blown temper outbursts. They may fight with brothers and sisters, neighbors, friends, at school, at church, and elsewhere. Sometimes the anger seems to be totally unrelated to the divorce. However, anger over the divorce can show up in different ways. Parents who get upset at a child for being angry just add to the problem. Parents who understand why the child is angry and respond, rather than react, to that anger are in a better position to help their child.

3. Bargaining/Guilt

Due to television, videos, computer games, and movies children learn that problems are often easily solved. They may believe they can get their parents back together. They

may attempt this type of bargain by getting in trouble and having to have both parents attend meetings about the "trouble," getting sick so both parents will be by their side, being perfect, so the parent who has left will return, or trying to get parents to hold hands or kiss good-by. Also, the child might think, "If I'm good, can we all live together again."

Some children feel guilty thinking that because their "bargain" wasn't good enough to reunite their parents and may blame themselves. Children need to be reassured that they are not to blame for their parents divorce.

4. Sadness/Depression

Children usually feel an overwhelming sense of sadness due to the loss found within the divorce experience. Although there may be some relief if the fighting has been intense, there is still a sadness connected to the break-up of the household.

Depressive symptoms are normal for anyone facing a significant loss in their life. Some of these symptoms are sleep problems, loss of appetite, inability to concentrate, withdrawal, crying a lot, drop in grades or productivity at work, loss of interest in usual activities, anxiety, irritability and/or easily angered.

If these symptoms are intense, prolonged with no period of light moods, parents should seek professional help for themselves and/or their children. Help is available by

seeking out a professional mental health provider for therapy, asking friends or physicians for help, or in an emergency calling a crisis telephone line at a hospital, calling the crisis telephone line at a local mental health agency, or calling 911.

5. Acceptance

At this stage of the grieving process, a person can now talk about the divorce without becoming overly upset. Acceptance is not about getting on with life so easily, as if nothing has happened. However, problems are seen in perspective and are not all related to the divorce.

How well and how quickly children move on with their lives is, in part, affected by how well the parents move on with their lives. There is a certain element of forgiveness present when one has achieved true acceptance of the divorce. Forgiveness has been described as setting oneself free by ceasing to feel resentment toward someone responsible for a wrong done against you. This is not to forget what has happened but rather to get past the bitterness.

When children are more in the acceptance stage they may think, "My parents are divorced and don't live together, but I still have a mom and dad who loves me."

Give grief the time it takes

The grieving process takes about 18 to 24 months (on average) to complete. The grieving process should not be hurried simply because it


cannot be hurried. It is a natural neurological process in response to major and significant life changes. Parents may observe their children expressing increased anger, having physical

illnesses such as stomachaches and headaches, low energy, crying, and constant questioning. These are all signs of grieving. Learn to respond to your child's grief

with understanding and skill, instead of reacting, and your child will be able to work through his or her grief with your love and support.



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A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling warmly as she hugs a child from behind. The child's head is visible on the left, and the woman's face is the central focus, looking towards the child with a gentle expression. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with warm lighting.

8 Ways to Keep Kids OUT OF THE MIDDLE

By Jonathan D. Sherman, LMFT

The Children & Divorce Series

This article is the fourth in a Children and Divorce Series to share some of my answers to this important topic. For 11 years I taught the State of Utah's Divorce Education Course for Parents. The biggest concern most parents face is how divorce will impact their children. Over the years, many parents have asked me how to best help their children through this difficult time.

Divorce is difficult for both parents and children, and unfortunately, all too common. Many parents go through divorce uninformed, scared and frustrated because they don't know how to navigate all the perplexing and confusing aspects of divorce. The more you know the more you can help your children.

Children often feel caught in the middle between their mother and father. Research reveals that this is a common source of stress for children of all ages. The problems and resentments created over being put in the middle are still experienced by children even as young adults.

In this article we will explore eight ways that kids are caught in the middle. The best way to keep them out of the middle is to refuse to engage in these behaviors. Besides the relief and peace children gain by being kept out of the middle, they are then also better able to deal with their own adjustments to the divorce more effectively instead of having to deal with

their parents' issues on top of their own.

The first four of the eight most common issues over which children feel caught in the middle are:

1. Carrying messages to the other parent

Divorced parents usually don't like each other and try to avoid talking to each other. Thus, the temptation to have the children do their talking for them is always there. This creates a problem for children because many of the messages are emotionally loaded or cause some unpleasant reaction in the other parent.

Children then can feel torn between divided loyalties, responsible for what happens, guilty for not getting one parent to go along with the other parent's wishes or for upsetting a parent, and generally unhappy about being the messenger.

2. Loyalty conflicts caused by “put-downs”, blame or “fault-finding” of the other parent

For most couples, divorce occurs because at least one of the partners is very hurt, or angry, or disappointed. The divorce process – being adversarial in nature – tends to make these strong negative emotions even worse. Unfortunately, parents often “trash” one another. When the put-downs occur in front of the children, the children are very hurt. Because children love both parents, this creates loyalty problems and anxiety for them.

3. Dealing with money matters

After divorce, money usually becomes tighter for both parents. The parent who receives child support payments often truly believes that it is not enough to meet their expenses, and the other parent should pay more support or pay for extras such as school fees, lessons, equipment for sports, etc. For the parent paying child support, there are often feelings that it is too high. Many support-paying parents resent having no say so over how the money is spent, particularly if they think the children are not getting their

needs met. There are many temptations, therefore, for one parent to complain to the child about the unfairness of the other parent, especially when they are worried about finances.

4. Being quizzed about the other parent's life

After the divorce, when children spend time with each parent in two different homes, each parent has a legitimate need to have certain information about their children's life in the other home. This is particularly true regarding school, doctor's and dentist's visits, clothing needs, special outings, and the children's general well being and adjustment to their new life.

Sometimes, however, the children may be a tempting source of information about the other parent's life. Many parents are curious about how their ex-spouse is getting along, and what decisions he or she is making about personal matters. The children should not be placed in the role of reporting about these private issues. Children may feel uneasy if they are asked about their other parent's private life. They may feel they are being asked to violate the other parent's trust.

5. Playing siblings against each other

Sometimes after divorce, parents will feel hurt when one of their children seems to prefer being with the other parent, and will voice this hurt in a way that can divide siblings. Telling one of the children that they were upset

or mad or hurt that their brother or sister is siding with the other parent is dangerous. Normal sibling competition can be increased when this happens. Siblings may resent each other for appearing to side with one parent against the other.

In divorced families, supportive relationships with siblings really help children adjust and cope better with stress. When there is strong competition and resentment among siblings, this important support is not available, and children are more at risk for adjustment problems.

6. Events when both parents will be present

Children usually want both of their parents to be present at certain times such as sports and school events, public performances in which the children star, the children's marriages, baptisms, graduations, etc. When the parents are still hostile toward each other, the children are also anxious about their being together at one of these events. When a parent asks a child at these times if it is all right to bring a new spouse or someone they are dating, the children often feel anxiety. The children may be more aware (than the parent making the request) of the anger this will provoke in their other parent.

Another stressful situation for children occurs when a child asks one parent if the other parent can attend an event that is not during the parent's allotted time with the child. The child is torn between wanting both parents present

and not wanting to make one parent angry.

7. Children feeling guilt over parent's loneliness

Parents often feel very lonely without their children. This is natural. They have gone from having a family every day, to having their children only part of the time. Often there is no other adult partner to fill the void. This experience will be most painful for non-custodial parents. There is a powerful temptation to want to share with the children the painful experience of loneliness.

Parents should make a point of minimizing the children's

need to worry by stating clearly that while the parent may miss the children and will be thinking of them, that Mom or Dad will be fine, will have good times, too, and will be busy with lots of things to do.

8. Threatening the other parent with not seeing the children

When parents are in conflict, it is often tempting to try to coerce the other with threats. One threat is not allowing children to talk with the other parent on the phone, pretending they didn't get a phone message, or not allowing the children to

answer the other parent's calls. Another threat is to withhold actual visitation, blaming the non-custodial parent with abuse or failure to meet financial obligations, thus stating that there will be no visitation until matters are resolved. These threats escalate parental conflict and is extremely damaging to children.

For more a more in-depth understanding as well as additional strategies you may read Donald Gordan, Ph.D.'s and Jack Arbuthnot, Ph.D.'s excellent book *Children in the Middle*.



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PARENTS CAN HELP THEIR KIDS through the Divorce Process

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help your children. In this article we will explore the grieving process children go through. Understanding this and helping your children understand this can give place and voice to what they are feeling and thinking.

Factors that affect children in divorce

The extent to which children are affected by divorce varies and effects will be determined by several factors. Their reactions depend on economic circumstances, ages, gender, extended family, degree of continued access to both parents, the presence of a third party, and the degree of hostility expressed.

Parents' reactions

Children's reactions are also often determined to a large degree by their parents' reactions. Sometimes parents depend on their children for emotional support or pressure their children into alliances against the other parent. These role reversals and alliance-related stresses may induce withdrawal, anxiety, depression, or other symptoms in children.

Stability and routine

Children thrive on stability and routine. By contrast, insecurity and anxiety are the normal reactions during separation and divorce. The more parents can do to keep a stable base for their children, the better they will do.

Maintaining a routine is one way to reduce uncertainty and reassure children that their world isn't falling apart.

Family continues

Children often worry over not having a family any more. Parents need to assure their children that families can come in various shapes and living arrangements and that many children have parents who are divorced. Children need to know that they will always be a part of a family and they will always have parents who love them.

Not their fault, not their responsibility

Children often feel embarrassed in front of other children about what has happened. They need to know that divorce is common; that they aren't accountable for what their parents have chosen to do, and that they don't to defend their parents' choices.

Dispel myths

Children sometimes have some erroneous beliefs about divorce. Parents can help their children by dispelling these myths. They need to hear some "truths," for example:

Children don't cause their parents' divorce.

No matter how hard they try, children cannot get their parents back together again. It is not the job of children to take care of their parents.

Parents are best able to help their children through divorce when they add to the abundant love they already have for their children, accurate information about the impact of divorce on children and how to best help them.



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