

HOW POST-DIVORCE CONFLICT AFFECTS CHILDREN

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Children hate divorce. Having the two people they love most in the world at odds with each other and living apart hurts. If you ask children what they would wish for if they had a magic wand, they would invariably say, “For mom and dad to be together again.” Even several years after the divorce, children of divorce view their parent’s divorce as the most significant event of their childhood.

Although children never learn to like the divorce, they do learn to live with it. The first two to three years are particularly difficult as the parents go through what has been called “crazy time.” Parents are making adjustments to the way they live their lives, some coping with the guilt of being the “dumper,” others coping with the rejection of being the “dumpee.” Nothing is the same and it takes usually 2-3 years for parents to recover from the divorce. During this time, children need to know they are loved, secure and safe. They need to know they will not “lose a parent.” They need to know they are not the reason the divorce occurred. They need to know that it’s OK to have a relationship with BOTH parents. They need to be treated with respect in terms of their thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires. In short, they need to be given the opportunity to exercise their rights as children of divorce.

This sounds like common sense, “of course” kind of thinking. The truth is, about 25% of children of divorce are never given the opportunity to exercise their “rights” because parental conflict is maintained at such a high level years following the divorce. Research is abundantly clear... ***THE LEVEL AND INTENSITY OF PARENTAL CONFLICT IS THE MOST POTENT FACTOR IN CHILDREN’S POST-DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT. HIGH CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTS IS THE SINGLE BEST PREDICTOR OF A POOR OUTCOME.*** The good news is that parents have control over this factor.

The million-dollar question is this, “Do you love your children more than you hate your ex-spouse?” If you are able to TRUTHFULLY answer, “yes” to that question, you have the desire to influence your child’s future in a very positive manner.

Carla B. Garrity and Mitchell A. Baris, authors of “Caught in the Middle” developed a Conflict Assessment Scale to assess the level of conflict between couples. The information gained from this scale should be used in developing parenting plans to minimize the child’s exposure to conflict and risk of psychological and physical harm.

If you answered “yes” to the million-dollar question, your goal is to score a Level 1 or 2 on the Conflict Assessment Scale. If you are at a 3, 4, or 5 you must realize you are harming your child emotionally, psychologically, and possibly physically (Level 5) – PERIOD. YOU MUST STOP THE FIGHTING if you want to give your child any chance at all to live a satisfying life.

Listed below are examples of what can happen to children who live with constant conflict between their parents post-divorce:

- 1) Being caught in their parent’s anger and pain has detrimental effects on their happiness and ability to enjoy relationships. Trust and security are destroyed.
- 2) Fighting disrupts many of the developmental tasks children must complete as they mature. Loyalty conflicts can destroy a child’s sense of who she is. If the child is always deferring her desires and needs to try to “keep the peace,” she is at risk of failing to develop her identity – who she is separate from everyone else.
- 3) Conflict immediately and profoundly weakens the parents’ fundamental protective role in the life of their child. The world becomes a very scary place for children when they see those that are to take care of them become completely out of control.
- 4) Conflict forces children into the middle of the fire, to which there is no satisfactory alternative. If they tell mom they had fun at dad’s house, they are hurting her. It is a no-win situation and the losses are huge. One eleven-year old girl said after her suicide attempt, “As long as I am alive they will fight.”
- 5) Children do not have healthy role models for learning how to regulate their moods and emotions. Their models are doing the exact opposite of what they have preached. Confusion is high as mixed messages are sent in a variety of packages.
- 6) Children of divorce have higher rates of divorces themselves. They often question their ability to sustain healthy relationships because they have not had healthy role models from which to learn the give and take of relationships.
- 7) Children of high-conflict parents are denied permission to love both parents. Children identify with BOTH of their parents. When you criticize mom in front of the child, the child feels the criticism as

directed at a part of her. IT IS THE WAY IT IS, even though it may not be intended to have that result.

In summary, children are denied all of their rights, their world becomes a very scary place, and childhood is no longer the carefree, fun time it was meant to be.

Again, the best news about the number one factor affecting a child's ability to adjust to divorce is that it IS CONTROLLABLE. As mentioned earlier, if you answered "yes" to the million-dollar question and are TRULY committed to putting your child's life over your own need to blame, the next step is to learn skills for resolving conflict and ultimately protecting your child from its harm.