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Class Material
Co-Parenting Divorce
Online Book Study Class
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HOW WILL THE CHILDREN TAKE IT?

Psychologists say divorce is only slightly less traumatic for children than the death of a parent. In many cases, both come as a total shock, but in death, mourning is accepted and encouraged, and friends and relatives are usually available to help and console both adults and children. But in the crisis of divorce, the support of family and parents is usually not available to children. Often parents themselves are unable to cope and are unavailable to parent their children adequately. In addition, parents may keep their sadness to themselves, thinking they are sparing their children; in reality, this can prevent children from going through the normal grieving period that helps relieve sorrow. According to a report in Pediatric News (June, 1985) the “normal” mourning process for children ranges from four to twelve weeks. This time frame refers to the initial grief. Mourning symptoms include angry outbursts, low energy, crying, and constant questioning. Other research suggests that the total mourning process is best measured in terms of months and sometimes year-not weeks.

You may wonder why children grieve. Shouldn’t they be relieved, especially if they have witnessed fighting between parents? Remember, many children are happy in their intact family life even when the parents are unhappy. The grief children can feel does not necessarily correspond with how close the parent and child were, so expect mourning even if you saw your child’s relationship with the other parent as minimal. Yet the closer attachment a child has to a now-distanced parent, the harder it will be for that child.

CHILDREN NEED TO FEEL SECURE
WILL YOU HELP OR HINDER THAT PROCESS?
WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

According to researchers Wallerstein and Kelly in the California Children of Divorce Project, children’s reactions to learning about separation and divorce are:

- Shock, surprise, and disbelief
- Worry about how their world will change
- Sadness and loneliness
- Shame and feeling different
- Anger at both parents
- Confusion over loyalty

These feelings follow the general stages of grief in the death and dying process as outlined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her watershed work, On Death and Dying. The last steps in this process are mourning the loss and, finally, acceptance. But divorce, unlike death, makes the departed parent simultaneously both unavailable and yet available.

Being reasonably candid about problems with children old enough to understand and admitting your sorrow that the marriage is over will help them through the grieving stage. Resolving old grievances between you and your spouse and settling money and custody issues as smoothly and as quickly as possible will help everyone get on with their new lives.

Some children protect their emotional side by turning off their feelings. The apprehension most children experience regarding the uncertainty that lies ahead greatly outweighs any relief they may feel at the ending of an angry marriage. Recognize these feelings of ambivalence in your children, realize they will feel both angry and relieved, and let them know that their reactions are okay.

Children who show few feelings are not necessarily more or less troubled than children who appear more openly distressed. Remember, the way grief is expressed does not necessarily correspond to the way it’s felt. Most children will see their parents’ divorce as the single major
trauma of their childhood.

Although research does suggest that divorce hurts many children at least for a time, it is wrong to conclude that all children have significant problems or that all children experience difficulty equally. The extent to which children are affected varies and effects will be determined by not one, but several factors. Your child’s reactions will depend on economic circumstances, ages, gender, personalities, repertoire of coping skills, the nature of your family, degree of continued access to both parents, the presence of a third party, and the degree of hostility expressed. Your children’s reactions will be determined to a large degree by your reaction. Children will model their behavior by how you are coping.

**HOW WELL YOU HANDLE THE DIVORCE TRANSITION AND YOUR OWN ANGER WILL AFFECT YOUR CHILDREN FAR MORE THAN THE DIVORCE ITSELF**

Children’s behavioral problems can be altered or reduced when parents respond to children with age-appropriate actions and words.

The best way you can help your children is to take care of yourself, and to avoid showing open hostility to the other parent. No matter how difficult your spouse may be, remember: A fight requires at least two people!

Children thrive on stability and routine. By contrast, insecurity and anxiety are the normal reactions during the change separation and divorce. The more you can do to keep a stable base for your children, the better they will do. Maintaining a routine is one way to reduce uncertainty and reassure kids that their world isn’t falling apart. Each family’s routines are unique; do your best to continue them.

It is fairly common for the parent initiating the divorce to perceive the children as doing just fine, whereas the abandoned parent perceives the children as troubled or or damaged.
I maintained a structured daily schedule for my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter. We kept up connections with former friends, ate familiar foods, and I spent a lot of quality time with her that first year. We did have to change residences. Yearslater she shared her anger about our nioving from a house to an apartment.-Susan Resnik, New York City

WHAT TO DO ABOUT “WHYS?”

You will probably be faced many times with the question, “Why?” from your child(ren). Why? covers a lot of whys. Why me? Why us? Why don’t you love me enough to make this marriage work? Why is this really happening? Why can’t we all live together again? If you have been truthful with your children and yet they keep asking for the real story behind your divorce, they may actually be asking these hidden questions:

• Was I responsible?
• Will you leave me next?
• Will you always love me?

One round of reassurance on your part is not enough. Your children will need many more rounds’

Listening to “Why did you make Daddy/Mommy leave?” is very painful. You must remind yourself that you are the adult. Your child cannot possibly share your perspective. Your child’s reactions are just those—a child’s reactions. Part of your job as an adult will be to handle your feelings in an adult, mature fashion. No small job, I know. Acknowledging your child’s feeling of sadness, anger, or frustration is your best response when your rational ones are not accepted.
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AGE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Your children’s ages will be the major factor determining what reactions you can expect, what behavioral changes may occur, and how you can help each of your children. Your explanation and choice of words when explaining your divorce will differ, too, for a 2-year-old and a 12-year-old. You should consider each child’s level of understanding, any prior knowledge of divorce that he or she has, and his or her gender.

However, some problems seem to be almost universal among children of all ages. Guilt is one, but although an adolescent may wonder and ask if he or she has caused your separation, a younger child will often simply assume responsibility for it and require repeated reassurance.

Having fewer past memories, very young children adapt faster to the new realities and tend to be less upset than preschoolers. A preschooler doesn’t fully understand the implications of a separation and divorce but will still understand the absence of a parent and usually has a fear of abandonment. Children ages seven to eight will be sad and, in the event of a new significant other entering the picture or remarriage, will be fearful of being displaced in the family. A nine- or ten-year-old will be angry and feel victimized by an event over which he or she has no control, whereas an adolescent may be angry at the parent who he sees as the culprit and embarrassed by the whole situation. In their natural egocentricty, most children will worry about how their lives will be changed. Where will they live? Will they have to change schools? Will they still go on vacations or away to camp? What will happen if one parent moves far away or remarries?

It’s common at any age for children to take sides, based on often incorrect observations or biased words of one or the other parent.

One thing parents who have successfully shepherded their children through divorce seem to agree
on is the best adjustments are made by kids whose lives are regular, who go to bed and eat meals on time, who don’t live in front of the TV set, who have well-organized activities, who have continued contact with the relatives of an absent parent as well as with the absent parent. It is also not the time to forgo discipline or to give in to every whim of a child.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Very young children may be unable to put a label on the experience of divorce, but even babies realize that something is different and usually react with bodily responses and regressive behavior in sleep or toilet training. When parents are anxious, toddlers sense the emotion and frequently become fearful themselves. The most important way you can help your infant or toddler adjust is by keeping the child’s life as normal as possible. Make any necessary changes gradually. Small children react more strongly to change but also make the easiest long-term adjustment because the memory of intact family life fades faster, and new household arrangements quickly become the norm. Young children are strongly affected by day-to-day caretaking. They need reassurance, love, attention, and rituals.

Custodial mothers of young babies, particularly nursing mothers, understandably have a hard time parting with a small child. Still, it is crucial for young fathers to bond and share time with even the smallest child. This will not lessen an infant’s bond to his or her mother.

- Expect your infant to cry more, to be more clingy and probably more shy than usual, perhaps even to lose his or her appetite. These are all normal reactions to a new and frightening situation over which he or she has no control.
- Realize that sleep problems, which are common anyway, are likely to surface-or resurface-as fears may heighten.
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• Treat any regression in your toddler as casually as possible. Don’t encourage it; don’t make a big thing of it, either. The most recent accomplishment, whether in the area of toilet training, sleeping habits, eating, or general behavior, is likely to be the first to go.

• Don’t be surprised if your toddler moves rapidly from angry tantrums to apparent happiness or from withdrawn sulkiness to aggressive, reckless behavior. The insecurity a child feels as a result of change often causes swings in mood. Some children become hostile.

• Young children are likely to become increasingly irritable and cranky. They may hit siblings and behave more aggressively with other children. This, and many other expected behavior patterns, are temporary and will change over time.

I can’t believe now that I worried only about how my two pre-teenage girls would cope with the divorce, assuming that the baby, age one, wouldn’t be affected. He was confused and upset and suffered much more than the girls did. -K. Campana, Scottsdale, AZ

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

• As early as you can, set up regular and frequent visits with your exiting spouse. Short, frequent visits, if possible in the custodial home, are often easier on small children than moving between two residences; but children are flexible and can adapt to a commuter lifestyle. It’s easier for a noncustodial parent to develop a personal relationship with a child on his or her own turf.

• Consider having the parent who moves out visit frequently at first, perhaps even every day for a time to
participate in the bedtime routine. If visits aren’t frequent, the absent parent may become a stranger to an infant or toddler.

- Provide your child with the extra needed love and attention without smothering or spoiling your child. It is inappropriate for a child to get the attention once placed on a now-distanced spouse.
- When you need sitters, have them babysit your young child at your house so that the child will have as little disruption in normal routines as possible. Have your sitter keep your routines and rituals. Try to use the same sitter on a regular basis.
- Use puppets, drawings, or toys to transform information about the divorce into a story that’s easier for little ones to understand.

AGE-APPROPRIATE BOOKS ON DIVORCE FOR CHILDREN

Many books have been written to help children at all age levels cope with the problems divorce presents for them. Most are as helpful for parents as for kids and provide starting points for talking about specific issues. A large percentage of these books are intended to be read together.

If children can identify with a character or situation, it helps them interpret the events around them and sometimes provides them with an active release for their own emotions. The insights help them solve their own problems and let them move on.

Children relate to books in different ways. Don’t be offended if they don’t want to read about divorce or discuss “it” with you. Children may be more receptive to books and discussions six months, rather than one month, after your separation.

Listed after each of the following discussions on what you can expect from your children at various ages are
some books you might find helpful. The titles referred to should also be available from your library.

My daughter was five when she didn’t let her little brother tell her noncustodial dad we had seen a movie with a male friend of mine. Later, when confronted, she said, “I didn’t want Daddy to know you go to movies with other people. It would hurt his feelings.” I realized what a burden my former husband and I had put on our children. I called my ex and asked him to let the children know that he goes out with friends and that he is not alone when children aren’t with him. He understood. It’s our responsibility to take the worry out of our children’s lives.
-Anna Weintraub, Los Angeles, CA

PRESCHOOLERS

A preschooler’s fear of abandonment manifests itself in various forms of separation anxiety. When parents separated, preschoolers often fear that any negative thoughts they’ve had about a parent has come true. They think that they are now being punished for a bad wish or angry thought and are to blame for the separation. It may be useful to look at the “Oedipus Complex.” Boys and girls at this age are often beginning their “love affairs” with parents of the opposite sex. They may have fantasized they will someday take the place of Dad in Mom’s affections, or vice versa. A preschooler may unconsciously “love” the opposite-sex parent more than the same-sex parent and suddenly—to the preschooler, almost magically—the less-loved parent is gone. This type of “magical thinking” can even prevent children from asking why the divorce is happening. After all, they might find out it really is their fault, as they suspect. Children at this age need to be told repeatedly that they are not being punished, and they are in no way responsible for what is happening.
between their parents. They need to hear that a parent leaving does not mean they are unloved or unlovable.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP**

- Don’t be surprised if your preschooler becomes preoccupied with “being good,” especially if your separation was sudden. The child may feel that his or her former misbehavior was the cause of one parent leaving or that he or she may be sent away.
- Understand there will be added anxiety concerns when leaving the custodial parent. Review your day’s schedule each morning with your child. Given child’s immature thought process, abandonment is a real fear. (“If Daddy left, might Mommy, too?”) When returning to the custodial parent many children respond with a tantrum that is really an angry expression of fear and anxiety felt while that parent was away.
- Expect regression in certain areas, including perhaps a return to a forgotten security blanket or an increase in masturbation and thumb-sucking—anything a child might think would return him or her to the safety of babyhood. Some regressive behavior, such as a loss of bowel or bladder control, will require your patience and attention. Allow regressive behavior within limits. Actually, having a security aid—a blanket or favorite toy—to fall back on can be very helpful to a child during this period.
- Be patient with a child who seems selfish. Egocentricity at this age is normal. Whether toys or parents, sharing is not an easy thing for them. (“Will I have the toys I want?”) Possessiveness can also be an effort on the part of a child to regain control, to literally “hold on” to things at a time when so many events now occurring are beyond his or her control.
- Be patient with a child who becomes overly sensitive to real or imagined injuries. This may be an expression
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of a need to be fussed over and cared

• Spend some extended one-on-one time together occasionally so that children can verbalize concerns that would otherwise go unexpressed in the rush of daily schedules.

• Don’t pump a small child for stories about the other parent. You might not get the whole story and if you do, you shouldn’t.

PRESCHOOL-AGE BOOKS

ITS NOT YOUR FAULT, KOKO BEAR, A Read-Together Book For Parents & Young Children During Divorce, by Vicki Lansky. KoKo, a loveable, unisex bear, learns what divorce means and about life in a family apart. Written for children 3 to 7 whose parents both intend to stay active in their children’s Lives after divorce. (Book Peddlers, 1998)

MY FAMILY’S CHANGING: A FIRST LOOK AT FAMILY BREAK UP by Pat Thomas and Lesley Harker. Pleasant, brightly colored, cartoon-style pictures of varied sizes and shapes show a boy and and their parents in various stages of the family breakup and the reconfiguration of their lives. (Barron’s, 1999)

I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT by Jeanie Ransom and Kathryn Kunz. Through the use of animal imagery ‘I Don’t Want to Talk About It’ covers the range of emotion a child might feel during ANY transitional time. (Magination Press, 2000)

DEAR DADDY by John Schindel. Jesse’s daddy lives on the other side of the country. Jesse writes and wants to hear from him. Finally she receives an invitation to visit. (Albert Whitman, 1995)
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Children from about ages 6 to 10 often react differently than those of other ages, sometimes suffering deeply. They’re too old to use fantasy to deny the situation and too young to have the maturity or the independence to remove themselves from all the implications or realize they are not responsible. They may make excessive attempts to be compliant and submissive.

Youngsters of this age are also fearful of being displaced. (“Will I have a new mother? Will there be another child taking my place in my parents’ lives?”) Keep in mind:
• Even when there has been a poor parent-child relationship, the absent parent will still be missed.
• Hope for parents’ reconciliation will be strong.
• Frustrated by their own sense of powerlessness, children in this age group can be intensely angry with both parents for “letting this happen.”
• It’s not unusual for stomachaches and headaches to occur, or for asthma to worsen.
• Watch your child’s school performance, and do not hesitate to ask for a conference with the teacher if grades slip. Although some school-age children do better in school in order to shut out what’s going on at home, others do poorly because they are restless and distracted with worry about their parents. Sometimes a child will let grades slip as a ploy to get both parents’ attention and have them need to come together.
• Realize that your child may align him or herself with the custodial parent and try to take on an adult role of the absent parent. For instance, a child may try to act as a mother or father to younger siblings.

*Our children, ages nine and eleven, were angry with their father because he acted like everything was normal.* - Toni Richardson, Hopkins, MN
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WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

• Advise your child’s teacher of the changes at home and let your child know that the teacher knows. If the school has a counselor, you may want to include that person, also.
• Enlist any and all help a school can provide if grades and behavior decline. A third party may be needed to correctly assess problems and ways to address them.
• Pay attention to your child’s relationships with other children. Depression, fear of rejection, or a feeling of shame may make him or her withdraw from other kids, preferring to be with adults.
• Expect expressions of loneliness for the absent parent. Allow time for frequent visits. Remind your child how soon he or she will see the absent parent. Let your child know, too, that the absent parent misses him or her just as you do when your child is not around. Making access easier or more frequent can lessen a child’s distress or longing for the departed parent. (This obviously does not apply to the absent, violent, or physically or sexually abusive parent.)
• Encourage contact and relationships with grandparents and other adults to ease lonely times as well as act as additional role models.
• Don’t substitute food and treats for your time. This can lead to a problem of filling “emptiness” with a poor alternative and set up a bad habit for life.
• Don’t discuss financial problems with your child. Kids this age are likely to take any comments you make about having to “move to a dump, or being unable to buy “decent clothes” literally and they will begin to worry, probably without telling you.
• Be specific about pointing out that some problems are for adults only.
• Help your child to talk about the divorce with his or her friends. Because they are usually embarrassed, they often need encouragement to do so.
- Sleep-overs by old friends provide a natural opportunity to share this information.
- Be aware that if your child refuses to talk about the divorce, it may be because he or she is denying it or is afraid of adding to your worries. Bring up the subject and offer to answer questions at any time.

I was touched by my seven-year-old daughter’s story that she wrote about her daddy visiting her on the moon. She obviously missed him and felt he was far away. I began to encourage her father to visit and call more often. -Gabrielle Peton, New Brighton, MN

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-AGE BOOKS**

**THE DINOSAURS DIVORCE**, by Laurene and Marc Brown. If dinosaurs got married, no doubt they would have to cope with divorce. Direct and lively text and comic strip-like illustrations deal with many aspects of divorce. (Little Brown, 1986)

**KIDS’ DIVORCE WORKBOOK: A PRACTICAL GUIDE THAT HELPS KIDS UNDERSTAND DIVORCE HAPPENS TO THE NICEST KIDS** by Michael Prokop. An interactive book designed to improve coping skills and confidence levels as kids become more aware of their positive aspects and inner strengths. (Algebra House, 2000)

**AT DADDYS ON SATURDAYS**, by Linda Girard. After Katie’s parents divorce, her daddy moves away. Saturday seems far away, but her mother and her teacher help her until Saturday, when she does see her father. (Albert Whitman, 1991)

**AMBER BROWN IS FEELING BLUE** by Paula Danziger. Now in fourth grade, the unsinkable Amber Brown copes with the fallout from her parents’ divorce. (Little Apple, 1999)
How the Children Will Take The News

Put yourself in your child’s place using words like, “If I were seven, I think I’d be wondering about ... ? Do you?” Therapists often tell children how other children have felt about divorce. If your own parents were divorced when you were a child, or if you have observed others go through the process, tell your child how others have handled their situation.

PRETEENS AND TEENAGERS

Preteens and adolescents aren’t necessarily better equipped to deal with divorce because of their age. Anger and uncertainty are normal reactions for these kids, although they may be more adept at hiding feelings. Teenagers sometimes find it easier to express their anger and sadness.

Adolescents’ needs are different from those of younger children. They are learning to separate from the family as a unit in their growth toward independence. Divorce poses additional conflicts for them. They often feel the need to align themselves with one parent and become more attached to the idea of upholding the family unit. Others take the opportunity to “slip between the cracks,” and separate all too effectively from the family, avoiding parental discipline or responsibility.

If a household is tense and family fights are frequent, a teen’s basic reaction will simply be to escape. Escape can take many forms, including detachment, staying away from the house, drug use, leaving school, and even choosing an unwanted pregnancy in order to feel needed and be loved.

In spite of their normal rebelliousness, teens are likely to be very moralistic and judgmental about divorce. They tend to make a scapegoat of the parent they think is to blame. They’re vulnerable to being used unfairly as an ally by one parent against the other. They will have a hard time slotting the departing parent as a good person. They will also believe that parents are
very selfish to disrupt their lives this way. It’s important to remember that:

- Although your adolescent may seem better able to cope with your divorce than younger children, he or she may very well be feeling a great deal of pain and embarrassment.
- Teens may experience fears that their own marriages may fail someday and question marriage for themselves; thinking, “I’m never going to have children and put them through this.”
- If a daughter blames her mother for her father’s departure (if he left for another woman), she may be feeling rejected herself and may need some counseling so as not to carry this into her own future relationships with men.
- Teens are usually upset and embarrassed with their parents’ sexual needs. It’s also difficult for them to deal with their parents’ sexuality while in the process of learning about their own. Sometimes there is actual competition with parents in this particular area.
- Even articulate teenagers who have previously been good communicators may withdraw temporarily as their way of dealing with their feelings. They may fear hurting a parent’s feelings and keep their pain to themselves.
- A teen who sides with the parent who does not initiate a divorce may be responding to a need to balance out the family scenario by providing companionship and emotional support to a parent perceived as the one deserted.
- Some teens choose healthy escape by spending more time with a friend or relative. It’s hard not to see this as rejection of a parent, but it is usually just a temporary response by the child.
WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

• Practice (or learn) good communication skills. Sentences should start with “I feel (concerned, confused, sad, unhappy) when rather than “You are (late, sloppy, wrong)
• Assure your kids that although the divorce may feel embarrassing, it is not shameful. You are still a family—yes, in a different configuration—and there are still two parents who care for and about them. Just verbalizing the word embarrassing will define their feelings so they can begin to deal with them.
• Encourage your child to continue developing his or her independence and outside circle of interests: school, athletics, friends. If you are the non-custodial parent, be prepared to provide transportation and/or attend school activities/sports events, so your child won’t have to give these up to see you.
• Make as much time as you can for attending school conferences, performances, or athletic events in which your child participates. Teenagers need you to show your interest as much as preschoolers.
• Give teens as much information as they ask for and can handle. They often look for simplistic answers and may draw inaccurate and unfair conclusions. Some may adopt a pseudo-mature attitude and try to become more involved than they should be in marital issues.
• Don’t forgo setting reasonable limits, rules, and curfews for a teen. Many teens need more structure rather than less in times of turmoil. Excuse the verbal attacks you may have to tolerate, but be cautious about giving in too much.
• Remember, there is a big difference between babysitting a neighbor’s child and looking after a younger sibling. Teens will resent responsibilities dumped on them unless they are part of a discussion and decision-making process.
• Be careful not to turn to your preteen or teenager for more support, assistance, or companionship than he or she can give at that age. Some kids rise to the occasion and enjoy increased self-esteem, but others find themselves resentful of the extra demands and confused about how they should handle an unfamiliar role. Let their behavior and words be your guide.
• Don’t pump teens for information about the other parent, or encourage them to take sides. It will make them feel manipulated, coerced, or bribed.
• Watch for signs of trouble, ranging from denial and depression to running away, suicidal threats, or drug use. If you discover your teen is showing signs of any kind of chemical abuse, get professional help at once.
• Think back to your own feelings as a teen and stretch your tolerance and level of understanding.

Custody for teens can be more complicated than for younger children, because they may have their own preferences that will have to be taken into account. An older teen can scarcely be forced to live with a parent he or she refuses to tolerate. A discussion of the pros and cons of living with either parent may be necessary.

For a child leaving for boarding school or college, this time is especially complicated. Such a child needs reassurance that each parent will stay in touch and will visit. A departing teen is dealing with his or her own feelings of separation and isolation. You will also have to determine where and with whom the holidays will be spent. Changing the place where a child feels “based” during that first year away can add significantly to the stress that child will experience.

Your child has, most likely, spent his or her life relating to parents as a unit. Now, as your maturing teen learns to relate to each parent as a separate and unique person, you can expect and look forward to the development of new and sometimes better relationships.
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When I worked at Domestic Relations Court, I often talked with teenagers who had lived with one parent since the divorce and now wanted a chance to get to know the other parent. It wasn’t that they no longer loved that parent or that the living arrangements were no longer suitable. As they spent more time discovering who they were, they needed to know more about who their “noncustodial parent” was. Sometimes they would spend a few months, a year, maybe just a few weeks there and then be satisfied. They would then ask to move back. Some say, “Children shouldn’t be allowed to play one parent against th other so much”, but I saw it as a normal response. -Sally Brush, Aring Institute, Cincinnati, OH

PRETEEN AND TEENAGE BOOKS

HOW IT FEELS WHEN PARENTS DIVORCE by Jill Krementz. In this beautifully illustrated book with the author’s photographs, twenty girls and boys ages 7 to 16 express their feelings about their parents’ divorces. They talk honestly about their feelings, the good and bad parts of joint custody, and the adjustments they must make. (Knopf, 1984)

IT’S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD, by Judy Blume. The ever-popular Judy Blume tackles this problem through the eyes of a 12-year-old girl, a middle child of three. She takes on the impossible task of getting her separated parents back together. Once the divorce is accomplished and the fighting stops, the children settle down, realizing that life’s not all bad. (Dell, 1986)

MY PARENTS ARE DIVORCED, TOO by Jan Blackstone-Ford. Here kids who have survived their parents’ divorce share their hard-won wisdom with other kids. (Magination Press, 1998)

HELP! A Girl’s Guide to Divorce & Stepfamilies- by American Girl Library. This book addresses a wide spectrum of topics that surround girls at this confusing time. Includes girls telling their feelings and stories. (Pleasant Company, 1999)
BEST HELP FOR CHILDREN OF ANY AGE

- Reassure your child that this separation is not his or her fault.
- Don’t talk negatively or with anger about your spouse to your children on a regular basis. If you can’t talk positively, limit what you say. It’s okay to acknowledge your anger as long as your children understand they can and do have feelings that are different than yours.
- Try to avoid arguing bitterly in front of the kids so they won’t feel that differences are resolved by yelling and fighting. Remember, too, that retreat and silence are just quieter forms of anger and are just as destructive.
- See if you can agree with your spouse about disciplinary matters, at least in the presence of your children.
- Make special efforts to maintain individual relationships with each child.
- Assure your child that it’s okay to love the absent parent. A child who wants to be like Mom or Dad isn’t being disloyal to you.
- Don’t compare your child to your ex-spouse, even when similarities are poignantly striking and painful to observe.
- Don’t blame your child’s anxieties, fears, or problems at this difficult time on the absent parent—either to the child or the absent parent.
- Help your children not to feel shame about your divorce. If you feel shame and shut your children out, they too will be ashamed and worry about facing their friends and schoolmates. A divorce doesn’t make you a failure.
- Don’t make your child a messenger between you and your ex. Children will not enjoy being in the middle but they will probably not tell you that.
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- Do let your children’s teachers know about the change in your family’s structure so they can help your child.
- Don’t make too many changes in your child’s life at once.
- Allocate family chores in such a way as not to overburden each child. Find ways to get household chores completed despite the absence of the one who always mowed the lawn, washed the car, and so on. Kids should not have to do all of Daddy’s or Mommy’s jobs around the house.
- Don’t ask a child who she or he wants to live with or loves more ... directly or indirectly!
- Encourage your child to resume normal activities.
- Acknowledge children’s deep-seated wish for a re-united family without offering false hope or angry denials.
- Include your child in any appropriate discussions or planning particulars with a parent who will be making a long-distance move.
- Try to maintain as much emotional control as you can. If you repeatedly fall apart, your children may, too, or they may feel obligated to take over adult roles that are beyond them.
- Don’t turn your child into your adult confidante.

As for yourself, forgive yourself if you haven’t scored 100 percent on this list. No one has!

YOUR CHILD AS YOUR PEER

Beware of the stressful family syndrome of mak- your child your confidante and companion, which family therapists report occurring with increasing frequency among single parents. It seems so right and so easy to devote yourself to your child, but boundaries of adult-child roles become blurred. Using a child as a crutch delays many parents from getting out and building new lives for themselves.
The old-fashioned idea that certain information ranging from financial worries to details about adult relationships is not for “children’s ears” has faded. But the parent acting as a peer puts an unhealthy responsibility on a child’s shoulders. Being in on everything may give a child a temporary feeling of importance, but children who are “parentified” give up part of their childhood, and therapists are now hearing about it. A child can feel responsible for a parent’s happiness and may feel reluctant (and guilty) about moving out on his or her own.

• Don’t confide in your child about your sexual involvements, the financial details of your life, or your general unhappiness with life.
• Beware of turning a formerly marriage-centered home into a child-centered home.
• Don’t mistake your child’s understanding and sensitivity to your needs for a reason to turn him or her into a sounding board; seek out group or individual therapy if you need someone to talk to.
• Don’t confuse being your child’s best friend with your child being your best friend. Children benefit from a strong parent who can listen and be available but not lean on them.

A child who has been like a best friend for years may make a dramatic break with you when he or she becomes a teenager. Sometimes, the tighter the parent/child bond in younger years, the more dramatic the break may be as that growing-up child asserts a sense of self.

We parents must learn to “let go” so our children are not forced to make divisive breaks themselves. This is especially important for families in which parents think, “It’s you and me against the world, kid.”

The worst aspect of being pals with your child is you lose your authority. Sometimes you compromise what you think is right when you try to be a pal to your kid.-Linda Lich, Lake Odessa, MI
GENDER-RELATED CONCERNS

One of the most significant variables, according to the research conducted by Dr. John Guidubaldi of Kent State University, is that of gender. Girls consistently demonstrated better adjustment than boys in divorced households, ranging from social skills to school grades. In fact, says Guidubaldi, the divorce of their parents hardly seemed to affect them.

Young boys, it appears, take divorce observably harder than girls—perhaps because it’s usually the father who leaves home. They may have difficulties with friends and teachers at school because they are more likely than girls to act out their anger and tend to be more aggressive and physical, in general. Guidubaldi’s study indicated that boys will do just as well as others in school if they are in contact with the noncustodial male parent. Interestingly, studies show that boys in joint custody were significantly better adjusted than boys in sole maternal custody.

A 1988 study by Krein at the University of Illinois-Urbana indicates that boys, even more than girls, in single-parent homes are likely to get less education than other kids by completing 1.7 fewer years in school.

Girls’ gender-related problems often catch up with them during adolescence, when they need to know they are important to the opposite sex. Sometimes a girl will think a father might have left because there is something wrong with her. Actually, the opposite-sex parent of both a son or a daughter makes a major contribution to a child’s confidence in his or her appeal to the opposite sex and in attitudes toward men and women as their children mature. As pointed out in the October 1985 issue of Family Relations, there is little support for the popular myth that parental absence after divorce produces either effeminate sons, promiscuous daughters, or juvenile delinquents. In fact, studies show that divorce is an unreliable predictor of mental illness, low achievement, or delinquency in children and adolescents.
All things being equal, children seem to do better with the same-sex parent. In other words, boys living with their fathers and girls living with their mothers are often better adjusted. Boys who live with their mothers may suffer for the absence of male role models. Don’t be too quick to assume there are no other accessible male role models around. A male teacher, a grandfather, a favorite uncle, a caring older cousin, or a neighborhood friend may well serve as a model and have long-term positive effects on a boy. A well-screened high school or college male babysitter can fill the role of big brother, too. TV and movies also influence children in positive ways.

GAY PARENTS AND GENDER CONCERNS

Though divorce based on one parent’s orientation for a same-sex partner has become less of a “closet” issue, it still adds additional complications and considerations to an already difficult life change. Children and the adult left in the marriage may have additional adjustments because society has not yet totally accepted the gay and lesbian lifestyle. Both adults and children will need to learn how to separate feelings toward the gay parent from the gay parent’s sexual orientation.

Professional counseling is usually very helpful in this situation. It can be advantageous to find someone who is sensitive to this issue. Still, the painful issues of breaking up a marriage are the same for the heterosexual or homosexual alike. You may be lucky to find in one counselor help with dealing with the sexual issues as well as the separation issues, or you might need to find two.

Children do need honest answers. Most children are-and should be-told about the gay parent by the gay
How the Children Will Take The News

parent. Children who are old enough to understand its implications will have many questions, some verbalized, some not. For instance, “Does this mean I will be gay? If I tell my friends, will they think I’m gay? Do I have to keep this a secret? Who can I trust enough to tell this to? Will anyone want to date me?”

Children of all ages need to know that the chances of their being gay is the same as it is for children of heterosexual parents. Older children may need help in dealing with their own embarrassment. Adolescents are sensitive to anything out of the ordinary when it comes to their parents, including the delicate issue of sexuality. They need to hear that their family is still acceptable, albeit different from those of most of their peers. Adjustment will be easiest for children when, as in every other divorce, parents can deal with them in a cooperative fashion while working out their own relationship outside the parenting arena.

Though state and county statutes and specific judges may influence the outcome, a custody case should not be expected to be lost based on a parent’s sexuality; it is advisable, however, to keep this issue out of the divorce process. Being frank about the issue may jeopardize chances for joint custody in some areas, regardless of how agreeable you and your spouse may be about it. For many in authority this is a moral issue that can muddy the waters.

Gay parents can be good parents—or less than adequate parents—just like everyone else. The desire to have and/or live with one’s children is separate from one’s sexuality. And there are many gay parents. One out of ten gay men are fathers; one out of three lesbians are mothers. Eighty-seven percent of the children of a gay parent were born in the framework of a heterosexual marriage. Many cities now offer parenting and support groups to gay and lesbian parents and their children.
GAY & LESBIAN PARENT SUPPORT

FAMILY PRIDE (formerly GLPCI/Gay and Lesbian Parenting Coalition), P.O. Box 65327, Washington, DC 20035 (202-331-5015), www.familypride.org, has information available. Also, COLAGE (Children of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere), 1150 Bryant St #830, San Francisco, CA 94103 (415-861-5437).www.colage.org.

STRAIGHT SPOUSE SUPPORT NETWORK/Amity Pierce Buckston, 33 Linda Ave #2607, Oakland, CA 94611 (510-595-1005) www.ssnetwk.org.

THE LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTING HANDBOOK. Creating & Raising Our Families by Martin April, PH.D. (Perennial, 1993)

ALYSON PUBLICATIONS, 245 W. 17th Street #1200, New York, NY 10011 (212-282-8100) publishes children’s books such as Heather Has Two Mommies, and Daddy’s Roommate.

ADULT CHILDREN CAN STILL BE CHILDLIKE

Divorcing couples expect adult children to be minimally disturbed, because these children no longer need their parents’ care and have their own interests. This is not necessarily so. Reactions of adult children are often similar to those of younger ones, but on a different level. They may mourn a lost way of life, feeling that their cherished memories of family life are only illusions. They may be embarrassed, especially if a parent is involved with a younger person, perhaps someone their own age. And they may be angry at being burdened with what they feel is another problem—their parents’ need for emotional support at a time when they have
problems of their own. Grown children tend to be drawn into the details instead of being protected from the details as parents do with small children. Unfortunately, adulthood can make it harder to forgive parents their weaknesses and sexual activities. Parents are the unspoken stable and secure “insurance policy” for children of any age and a split ruptures this assumption.

- Do not tell your adult children that you stayed together for their sake, whether or not that’s true. They may be resentful.
- Help them understand that “all those years” were not a sham, that it’s okay to keep their warm memories intact. Remind them that people change and that parents are people, not statues on pedestals.
- Be prepared to see these young adults take sides just as younger children sometimes do. They often feel protective of the parent who they think is the “victim.” Even as adults they need to have permission to be with both parents. After six months or so their initial anger will lessen as they try to establish new relationships with each parent.
- Take advantage of the opportunities you now have as an individual to build new relationships with your children.
- Don’t insist that grown children come home to spend holidays with you if they seem reluctant. Some young people find it difficult to return when there’s no longer a “real family” and the old traditions cannot be continued. If they have their own families, it is important for them to establish their own traditions in their own homes. You may want to visit them during vacations and long weekends.

**Adult Children of Divorce (‘ACOD’)**

Even for older young adults, their parent’s divorce is difficult. Using these words above, search on Amazon.com for books or in Google.com for websites where there is helpful information and resources.
Little has been written about siblings as support for each other during divorce. Although it has been suggested that divorce is harder for an only child, this perhaps has more to do with the fact that when one parent moves out, a larger “percentage” of that family has diminished than when there are two or more children. Sibling support seems to come more from the presence of sharing an experience than from talking about it. In fact, children seem to discuss it very little with each other and don’t know how to use each other as a resource or for emotional support. Lack of experience about “feeling talk” is one suggested reason. When exposed to other children in a group situation, however, children begin to learn how to put words to feelings that can help relieve the anger and stress being experienced. Also, be aware that children will be more prone to discussing their parents and the divorce with a sibling if they disagree with the other sibling’s different attitude or perception of one parent’s behavior. This lends more to personal judgments and division rather than to help and support.

One study on twins has indicated that fathers who remain active in the lives of their twin children after separation lessen “twinning behavior” (twin dependency, shyness, passivity), particularly with male twins. An active father helps them develop as individuals.

*Our kids were fighting a lot and they wanted each parent to have one of child separately at each house in our shared parenting arrangement and switch each week making them, in my mind, singletons. They said, “If you and Daddy can get a divorce, why can’t we?” While I was willing to do it now and then, my basic response was “no”. -Julie Hall, Boca Raton, FL*
WHEN PROFESSIONAL HELP IS CALLED FOR

Although some children make it through their parents’ separation and divorce fairly easily, others feel the after-shocks of a divorce months and even years later, suffering socially, academically, and emotionally. One researcher found that half of a group of preschoolers were more troubled a year after their parents’ divorces than they had been immediately after. In most cases, these were children whose parents were still feeling hurt and rage and were not supplying consistent care for them. Even though it’s not reasonable to wait five years to seek professional help, it is worthwhile to give your child some time to adjust, perhaps six months or a year, if problems aren’t severe.

Above all, remind yourself that not every behavioral and emotional problem any child displays is a direct result of divorce. One fight at school or one bedwetting incident doesn’t have to be related to the divorce. Many will be normal developmental occurrences common to children in any home. Books that trace child development through grade school years are excellent resources for understanding normal versus problematic behavior.

But repeated problems in any one area or lower school performance should be addressed. Difficult behavior doesn’t mean a child is psychologically disturbed. Children need time—and sometimes extra outside help to adjust. Discipline is usually the key family issue that prompts a family to seek professional help. Discipline problems can arise from children’s inability to sort out feelings or adjust to the separation. Or a child may just lack good coping skills. Misbehavior can be the result of fear, hostility, or insecurity and a signal that the child needs more positive attention for himself. Children who are unsuccessful at obtaining enough positive “strokes” will try to get any kind, including negative ones. “Misbehaving” at least gets a parent’s attention, and children prefer that to being ignored.
Long-term studies show that only 30 percent of the people going through divorce have serious social adjustment problems—the same percentage for the population in general. This is not meant to dismiss the fact that this transitional time creates real emotional trauma but rather to help you keep long-term problems in perspective. You can’t always make children happy, or speed up their grief process. Your children will eventually have to adjust to the reality of divorce by themselves. Near the end of the first year, they should have:

- Accepted the reality that the family will not be living together anymore, and that you will not return to the other parent. (Most kids never quite give up fantasies that you will reunite, but this fact should be set aside, at least intellectually.)
- Separated themselves from your adult conflicts and returned to their normal absorption with themselves and their own activities. If you’ve moved, they should have adjusted to a new home and new school and new friends.
- Stopped blaming themselves for your breakup.
- Developed the self confidence that allows them to speak up if they feel one parent (or both) is using him or her as a messenger.
- Learned to refuse to allow one parent to “bad-mouth” the other.

Hopefully it will only take a year for children to come to terms with their basic feelings of loss of the original family and any rejection or desertion by a parent, although some anger and sadness may still persist. It’s comforting to know that if they have made a successful adjustment, your children will have learned invaluable skills that they’ll use later in life.

RESENTMENT HURTS MOST
THE ONE WHO FEELS IT.
How the Children Will Take The News

WHEN COUNSELING WILL HELP

Children whose parents fight a lot and then divorce seem to need more help than children whose parents fight a little and then divorce. As we have said, children are most affected by parents’ angry behavior.

Although you can’t get inside your kids’ heads and speed up the grieving process or get rid of the anger, you can try to provide professional help. There are many avenues of help to explore. Short-term counseling has proven to be effective for children and families. Don’t let tight finances prevent you from seeking professional help. Some services are free or available on a sliding-scale fee. But do make sure the counselor is experienced in handling family problems. Places to turn to are:

• Public schools. They often offer short-term counseling groups for children during or after school hours.
• Your employer’s health coverage. Your plan may include family counseling. If your children are also covered on your ex’s insurance, check for the best coverage.
• Family service agencies. Social service agencies, or local chapters of the United Way often offer special parenting and divorce groups.
• Local hotlines, divorce counseling groups, or a woman’s center.
• Recommendations made by your personal physician, the local county medical association, or American Psychiatric Association.
• Marriage and family counselors listed in the Yellow Pages. Or contact The American Assn of Marriage and Family Therapy, 112 S. Alfred St, Alexandria, VA 22314. (703) 838-9808. (www.aamft.org.)
• An on-line therapist directory referral service can be found on the Internet at http://www.psychology.com/therapist.
CONSIDER PROFESSIONAL HELP WHEN:

- Your child has shown uncharacteristically poor school performance for a semester or so, even after you’ve consulted and worked on the problems with teachers and school counselors.
- Your child is losing friends because he or she is unusually aggressive or apathetic and cannot seem to get along with anyone.
- Your child shows uncharacteristically intense anger and throws many tantrums or overreacts to minor situations.
- Your child has had prolonged mood swings that range from hostility to extreme affection.
- Your child continues to grieve unrestrainedly for the absent parent or the former family life.
- You see other radical changes in your child’s behavior, such as continuous problems in school, cheating, lying, or stealing, use of alcohol or other drugs.

Most parents wait until there is a crisis or major problem before seeking professional help. Be open to counseling before a major crisis occurs. You needn’t wait for a long and obvious list of problems and concerns to develop, either. Use your judgment and your knowledge of your child and trust your comfort level and parental intuition. It maybe only one event that your child can’t share with either parent that may trigger a need for a counselor to help the family; other times unusual behavior can be a deep-rooted cry for help.

Besides addressing particular issues, therapists can also work to repair a child’s self-esteem and provide him or her with better coping skills. Therapy can validate feelings of frustration, reduce stress, and help give children a new sense of control. Keep in mind that therapy
often requires the presence of all or various family members along the way to be effective. Getting counseling for a child should not mean scapegoating, or trying to identify the child as “the one with the problem.” Some therapists use “play therapy” not only to treat symptoms but to prevent problems with younger children. By moving around toys or figures that represent family members and talking about these relationships, professionals can often prevent concerns from becoming concrete problems later in life.

Some unresolved emotional problems show up as physical symptoms rather than behavior problems. Medical attention will be needed for the symptoms, but counseling may be required as well for the emotional cause.

Above all, children need to know that feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, and fear don’t mean they themselves are bad, unlovable, or crazy. They need to know they can “love Daddy” even though Mommy doesn’t. Sometimes these words must come from a neutral third party, despite words of reassurance from a parent. A third party can also help family communications to take place safely among family members.

OUR FIRST CONCERN SHOULD BE PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN FROM OUR OWN TEMPORARY INSANITY
- Will Glennon

My nine-year-old son was waking up grouchy almost every day. He never wanted to try anything new or different. I didn’t realize he needed professional help until we had our pictures taken at a portrait studio. The proofs showed that he was in pain and uncomfortable, stilted and not smiling real easily. He’s seeing a therapist now and, one year later, is my own happy-go-lucky son again. -Andrea Posgay, Minnetonka, MN
If you are unable to cope with daily routines in your job, or social life, seek professional help—especially if you are abusing yourself or your children with drugs, alcohol, or through neglect. Getting help if you are unable to cope is the greatest gift you can give your children. These same resources that prove helpful with them are available to you. Seeking appropriate help for you and your children is both an act of love and a sign of strength.

DON'T SPEND TIME REGRETTING THE THINGS YOU'VE DONE—RATHER THE THINGS YOU HAVEN'T DONE.

IF YOU HAVE LOST CONTROL

Physical abuse of your children is not okay. If you find yourself on the verge of striking a child, or your temper escalates more than usual, the divorce may be affecting you more than you know. You owe it to your children to get help for yourself in learning how to cope constructively with your anger and frustration. Seek private counseling or contact PARENTS ANONYMOUS—National Office, 675 West Foothills Blvd, Suite #220, Claremont, CA 91711, 909-621-6184. (www.parentsanonymous.org) Chapters in each state offer weekly meetings—no dues—and a 24-hour hotline.
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BUILDING OR REBUILDING KIDS’ SELF-ESTEEM

In the pain and confusion of separation and divorce, we all tend to feel lost and unloved, children especially so. Our good feelings about ourselves often seem like they’ve turned to sand running through our punctured egos. Children don’t know that there will be enough love to go around once their parents live apart. Prove them wrong! And, parents sometimes feel (unconsciously) that there isn’t enough love available to them from their children if the kids have to share it in two households. Wrong again! Some ideas to get you back on track are:

• Show your children a lighted candle and indicate that the flame represents your love. Then light another candle off of that flame to represent the other parent’s love. Neither is diminished. A third candle can be lit from either of these two flames. Again, neither flame is diminished. Moral: There is plenty of love to go around.

• The “Love Bucket” metaphor is a good one to share with every child to help learn how to ask for extra loving. Each of us carries a “Love Bucket.” Sometimes, as we carry it around, it can get low from sloshing over the top, from evaporation, or from an occasional spill. Everyone’s “Love Bucket” needs refilling from time to time, but because we can’t actually see when the other person’s bucket is low, we must tell someone else so they can help us get it refilled.

• Conscious use of verbal praise is obvious, but it really does work. Better yet, praise “overheard,” such as that spoken on the phone or to another, is a good technique.

• Letting a child be in charge of an activity can help overcome feelings of helplessness. Cooking, meal planning, or making that day’s TV choices are some ways to implement this idea.
Please photocopy these tips and share them with your children.

**TIP SHEET FOR CHILDREN**

**HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR PARENTS’ FIGHTS**

1) Understand IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT. Parents’ arguments, like decisions about divorce or separation, are their business and not kids’ fault or responsibility. Don’t feel guilty when your parents argue. It is not up to you to get them to stop.

2) DON’T TRY TO SOLVE YOUR PARENTS’ PROBLEMS. Only they can do that. If you try, you will probably get caught in the middle, and that will only make matters worse. Don’t take sides. If one parent asks your opinion or advice or tries to pull you into the middle of a disagreement, just say, “I think I’d better stay out of this.”

3) LEAVE THE ROOM WHEN YOUR PARENTS ARGUE. Find some activity that helps take your mind off of it. Call a friend, play your favorite music, DVD, video game, or take up a hobby in the basement.

4) KNOW THAT THESE EXPERIENCES ARE REALLY HARD ON EVERYONE. It’s not easy to live through such confusing times. You’re not crazy to feel the way you do. Remember, arguing may be scary but it isn’t the end of the world. An argument can be an effective way of working out a disagreement.

5) DON’T KEEP YOUR FEELINGS INSIDE. Find someone you can trust and talk to them. This may be a parent. It could be a grandparent, friend, teacher, clergy, counselor, or older brother or sister.
How the Children Will Take The News

Please photocopy these tips and share them with your children.

TIP SHEET FOR CHILDREN
IT’S OKAY TO ASK YOUR PARENTS:

• Please spend some time alone with me—even five minutes of my very own time—not related to school, room cleaning, or things like that.

• Even if you are sure my other parent will “hurt” me, please let me learn myself. I’d like you there with a hug if I do get hurt ... and please don’t say “I told you so!”

• Please don’t call me the “man” or “mother” of the house. I NEED TO BE A CHILD.

• Please trust me if, once in a while, I don’t want to talk. Sometimes, even though you are ready, I’m not.

• Don’t react with anger when I say I want to live with my other parent. Usually when I say it, I am angry, hurt, and scared, too.

• Please let me tell you what I want to tell you about my visits with my other parent. Often I’m afraid I’ll hurt your feelings if I tell you that I had a good time.

Source.—The Airing Institute 6881 Beechmont Ave, Cincinnati, OH45230
A CHILD’S BILL OF RIGHTS

I. The right of the child to be treated as an interested and affected person and not as a pawn.

II. The right to grow up in the home environment that will best guarantee an opportunity to achieve mature and responsible citizenship.

III. The right to the day-by-day love, care, discipline, and protection of the custodial parent.

IV. The right to know the non custodial or each parent having joint custody and to have the benefit of such parent’s love and guidance through adequate visitation.

V. The right to a positive and constructive relationship with both parents, with neither parent permitted to degrade the other in the child’s mind.

VI. The right to have moral and ethical values inculcated by precept and example, and to have limits set for behavior so that the child may develop self-discipline early in life.

VII. The right to the most adequate level of economic support that can be provided by the efforts of both parents.

VIII. The right to the same opportunities for education that the child would have had if the family unit had not been transformed.

IX. The right to such periodic review of custodial arrangements and child-support orders as the parents’ circumstances and the child’s benefit require.

X. The right to the recognition of the fact that children involved in a divorce are always disadvantaged parties, and the law must take affirmative steps to assure their welfare.

Adopted from Wisconsin Supreme Court decisions