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Class Material
Co-Parenting Divorce
Online Book Study Class
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LOOKING DOWN THE ROAD

DIVORCE IS A PROCESS, NOT AN EVENT

This is not an original statement; it has been stated by many others who have written on the subject. It bears repeating, though, because it is worth remembering as we move through every step from the decision to separate to the realization that we have, at last, settled comfortably into our new lives. And it may be comforting to realize that you are not alone. According to the 1993 U.S. Census, 26 percent of all American children (57 percent for black, 32 percent for Hispanic and 19 percent for white) live-technically-in one-parent households.

The first year is often the most unsettled, the most chaotic. Most divorced parents find the second year easier. But life always changes; new routines are adapted; adjustment are made to financial conditions. New traditions are set up gradually, and family holiday celebrations are modified. You have time to nurture new friendships that were not possible when you were married. Single and separate parenting is something you get better at with time and practice.

LONG-TERM ADJUSTMENTS

There are really two periods of adjustment following a separation and divorce. The information presented here focuses more on your immediate concerns and reactions of the first weeks, months, and your initial year of separation. This does not mean that it will all be smooth sailing after that. Even if the parenting arrangements were constant when the children were younger, there will probably be changes in these arrangements.
Looking Down the Road

during adolescent years. You will need to be flexible. Your restructured family will shift into a second stage of adjustment (and maybe later a third and fourth) with time and new circumstances. Each will bring with it new reactions and concerns that must be dealt with as they arise. Time will not heal every wound—and even when a wound heals, a scar often remains. It’s normal to be hesitant to love and trust. No one wants to be vulnerable again. But frequently we do fall in love again and hopefully are just a bit wiser for it all.

As for loneliness, there is no way out of it but through it. We seem to face all of life’s toughest things alone—from being born to dying; from loving to feeling pain.

I don’t mind being alone but I am lonely. But I was lonely in my marriage, too.—Mother of 2, separated 6 months

ON-LINE HELP

If you shy away from groups, don’t know anyone going through a divorce or want to look for information anonymously, computer on-line services may be the place for you. There are Internet home pages to browse, on-line services with chat rooms for socializing, and legal resources to explore. (Keep in mind that just because material is on-line, however, doesn’t insure its accuracy.) Some places to begin are:

The Divorce Page: www.divorcesupport.com
Divorce Helpline: www.divorcehelp.com
Divorce Online: www.divorceonline.com
Divorce Source: www.divorcesource.com
Divorce Central: www.divorcecentral.com

For inspiration, you may wish to print-out, cut-out and post quotes that you’ll find helpful during your divorce at www.practicalparenting.com/quotepage.html.
WHEN IT’S FINALLY FINAL

Despite the relief, the day your divorce is final is yet another emotional milestone. It’s hard to know how you will react until the time comes. Consider inviting a friend with you or to join you for lunch afterward, if a court appearance is required. If you’re taking time off from a job you may or may not want to go back to work. Keep your options open. Sometimes you aren’t aware of your official divorce date until the papers arrive or your lawyer contacts you, or you read it in the newspaper. In any case:

• Mark the occasion. Don’t let it slide by or pretend it’s not a major day. You don’t have to celebrate. Perhaps just eat out, say a special bedtime prayer, or light candles to signify a new beginning.
• Consider letting your children read a copy of your decree (with the dollar figures eliminated) so that they know what the terms are.
• Explain clearly if there will be changes in their lives now that the decree is final.

_I have had to show my oldest child a copy of our divorce decree several times so she understood why she had more days at Dad’s house._-Rod Martel, Minneapolis, MN

Even believing your marriage failed and talking about it provides a description of a marriage. When the marriage becomes part of your history, it will no longer be a marriage.

LIFE IS A PROCESS OF LOSING OUR ILLUSIONS.
On a practical level, remember to think about your will. Guardianship of your children and your assets are now new considerations that should be dealt with at once, especially if you are the sole custodian. If this wasn’t part of your divorce stipulation, it’s time to go back to your lawyer and have something on paper. Lack of planning can necessitate new custody battles and put children of decreased single parents in limbo for months. Discuss your arrangements and wishes with the appropriate parties so as one lawyer said, “everyone knows who will take the children home from the funeral.”

We were concerned about how we would cope with the death of the other parent. We agreed that while the children were young, we’d each keep a life insurance policy with the other parent as beneficiary to help with expenses in the event of death.-Unsigned

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Many women choose to return to their maiden name after divorce. This can be done legally or just as a defacto act. This decision is always a very personal one; what’s right for you is what feels right. Even so, as your children’s mother, there will always be times when you should probably refer to yourself by your married name for ease of identification (unless you remarry), even if you do choose to drop your married name in the normal course of your day.

Changing your name legally is not difficult but it takes a bit more paperwork. You can do it as part of your divorce decree or you can do it later yourself. You will need to fill out an application for a name change and schedule a courtroom hearing, which usually is a brief procedure. There are fees involved at each step, but it is not a complicated process.
I took my maiden name back at the time of my divorce. For me it was an affirmation of my personal integrity. It was amusing that my kids asked if they could, too! I told them I did think that would work real well.-Jean Travis, Bloomington, MN

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

After the divorce paperwork is completed, you must work on your “inner divorce.” Sometimes that’s the bigger job. Coming to grips with your own anger and unfulfilled dream is important. In the beginning anger has a useful purpose; it allows you to distance yourself from your former spouse. But continuing anger requires creative, constructive expression. Revenge must be processed intellectually. Verbalizing venom with trusted friends or in counseling is important and useful but your children should never be the recipients of your fury. You’ll only be “done” with your war stories when you no longer have to let another know the real scoop, and when you can finally see your former partner as a benign friend, stranger, or distant relative. To help you get through your “inner divorce”:

• If you haven’t already done so, start a journal (for your eyes only) to record your feelings and your daily progress. Don’t worry about writing well; just get the words down on paper. Keeping track of the sequence of events for later reference or describing your ex’s behavior or your anger can be healthful when vented here. (Down the road, a long way down, it may be a valuable legacy for your children to read when they reach adulthood.)

• Find other acceptable ways to release tension and strong emotions. Take up a new sport or relearn an old favorite.

• Take care of your body. Eat regular and balanced meals, and get enough rest and exercise. Indulge yourself with a new hairstyle or a membership at a
Looking Down the Road
tennis or health club. Don't let your distress be an excuse for excessive eating or drinking; no one will be hurt but you.

- Get a massage, if your budget allows. Lack of touch, if you have been used to it, can be very hard.
- Be more careful around the house, when walking outside, and especially while driving. Accidents are more likely to occur when you are preoccupied and upset. Divorcing people have a higher than usual incidence of traffic violations.
- Understand that if you are not experienced in thinking for yourself or valuing yourself separately from your marital relationship, taking responsibility may seem even harder. Rest assured, over time, your new self-reliance will amaze and delight you.
- If you have money to invest, remember the words of Caroline Donnelly of Money Magazine: "Nobody, not your broker, your accountant or your brother-in-law will care or worry as much about your money as you do. There is no single best investment, and there's nothing wrong with simple, conservative investments that let you sleep at night. You'll earn more money by by spending your energy on your career than on your investments. If you live within your means by a wide enough margin, budgeting is unnecessary."
- Attend a support group. Sharing experiences with others who have "been there" lessens the pain.
- Select a friend or relative (not an in-law) with whom you can share your feelings. Sound out your perspectives for decision making. Don't overburden friends, though, and be prepared to return the favor.
- Examine your attitude toward the opposite sex. If you are bitter-and remain that way-you are likely to color your children's lives in lasting ways.
- Get counseling. No one should or has to "tough this one out." If you weren't angry before, I promise you the process will make you so. Don't store this emotional baggage. It will sink you.
Separation and divorce produce a great deal of stress that affects the body’s immune system. A study at the Ohio University College of Medicine compared women who had been separated from their husbands for less than a year with women who were still married. Blood tests showed that separated women had lower levels of cells that resist tumors and bacteria and higher levels of cells that indicated a susceptibility to virus. (The study also showed that marital conflict itself takes a toll on one’s health.) And, grief, including the grief experienced in a divorce, is physically as well as emotionally exhausting. The fatigue you feel is the body’s way of processing emotional stress. Treat yourself with extra TLC, especially when your body is sending you obvious signals. If you don’t know how to nurture yourself, consider talking to a counselor. Time, restructuring your life, and finding new ways to bring happiness into your life will therefore be your best prescription for a healthier you. And beyond access to both parents and the ending of parental conflicts, the well-being of the caretaking parent often determines the adjustment of the children.

*Divorce was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Even though it was a choice I had made (after fifteen years), I was not prepared for the pain.* -Linda Wiesman, Elizabethtown, NJ
DEALING WITH THE PAIN

If we only knew just how long it will take for the inner pain (which more often feels like panic) to go away, we could just settle in and wait. Instead we live with an inner roller-coaster over which we have no control. Just when you think you have got a handle on your feelings, you nose-dive again. It is important that you remember (from the voices of experience) that these peaks and valleys do become less steep and the ride will smooth out—but it’s never done on our schedule, and it always seems to take longer than we would like or allot time for. When the pain hits:

• Go for a walk. Do something physical.
• Write down your thoughts and feelings on paper.
• Call a friend.
• Call an acquaintance who you think might become a friend.
• Remember every divorced person has felt like you do now and lived through it. Eventually it will become part of your past.
• Pick up a piece of insightful reading. It really does help, especially on weekends and at bedtime.

I found that walking the exact route on my daily walk became important. A cousin told me she swam laps because it was important to her that she could only go as far as the end of the pool. I guess self-imposed boundaries and routines can be therapeutic for adults as well as kids.-Unsigned

GUILT AND BLAME AND ALL THAT

Parenting and guilt go together like peanut butter and jelly. The parental guilt that follows divorce is
monumental—and just as futile as the guilt you felt the first time you lost your temper and punished your child. Divorce feels like failure, and failure feels bad. Don’t heap all the guilt and responsibility on yourself. Blaming your ex-spouse is just as bad—and just as useless.

All parents think to some degree that through the breakup of their marriage they have failed their kids. It helps to recognize that your feelings of grief, rage, and depression are perfectly normal after a divorce. Do the best you can taking care of yourself and the kids, if they’re with you, as you work through your feelings. Don’t allow yourself the luxury of self-pity, because that usually turns into guilt for thinking you are selfish. What will work is:

• Giving up trying to be mother and father to make up for one less parent being around. Being just one parent is fine. Look for others (such as friends, relatives, teachers, etc.) to help meet your child’s needs for other adults.

• Being careful to avoid role-reversal while you resolve your old grievances and start to pick up the pieces. Some parents find they are especially prone to lean on children of the opposite sex, looking on them as “the man of the family” or “a good little housekeeper.” Kids need to be kids; they need to know parents will be parents.

• Trying to remember that much of the negative behavior your children may display including many of their problems are just part of their growing up and not necessarily the result of the divorce. One phase will replace another, just as it did in your old family life.

• Not apologizing to your child for getting divorced. Your divorce was not set up to hurt your child intentionally.

• Learning to tolerate your children’s disapproval of your setting and enforcing limits. Tolerating rejection without another adult backing you up is hard, but that’s what is required of you as a single parent.
Looking Down the Road

• Trying to not make up to the kids for the divorce by devoting yourself entirely to them. You are entitled to a life of your own, and if you don’t have it, you’ll risk becoming a martyr and a stifling, dull, overprotective parent. And that will create another kind of guilt later.

• Refusing to indulge in excessive material items or guilt trips (the “nothing-is-too-good-for-my-child” syndrome) or deprive yourself to give your children “more.”

• Not saying yes to your child’s every whim. It will produce a demanding, self-centered child who believes you owe him or her any and every compensation for your divorce.

• Knowing what you know about guilt, being careful not to encourage your kids to feel guilty about loving and enjoying being with their other parent. Let them know you have plans and that you’ll be okay while they are gone.

• Avoiding “super Mom-ism” or “super Dad-ism.” Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can—which is all any of us can do.

I felt so guilty about MY divorce depriving my children of a “normal” family that I did nothing for myself for the first five years after the separation. All I did was work to support them and stay home to take care of them. I didn’t realize how bad this was for them until one by one, each of the older children moved to California to be with their dad and away from their dull, martyrish mother. -Unsigned

GUILT IS THE GIFT
THAT KEEPS ON GIVING.
-Erma Bombeck

185
And if you are experiencing that most guilt-laden trip of all—resenting having kids at all (or having the major responsibility for them)—be gentle on yourself. We’ve all found ourselves with that feeling at one time or another.

Legally I was a single woman but it did not feel single. I always had my two children in my life to whom I felt bound. Then I would feel guilty. -Lynn Gail, Boston, MA

**THE WORKING PARENT**

The breadwinner/homemaker/parentcombination most divorced parents with sole or shared custody, assume is a physical, emotional, and financial struggle. The change occurs abruptly; a father or mother must assume most of the responsibility for the children, permanently or for a time, without adequate time to prepare. Men who have not shared household and parenting chores equally—and this means many men—find it hard to learn how to run a house and deal with kids’ emotional needs in addition to earning a living. (The movie Kramer Versus Kramer was a popular example of a man’s learning experience—although it reinforces stereotypes of males as initially incompetent.) Women returning to the work force after several years at home, or entering it for the first time, find themselves exhausted and overwhelmed. The main problem for many women is that of money; a drop in their standard of living is almost a given.

According to Faye Smith, a psychologist at Smith College, divorce interferes with work more than any other trauma in a person’s life. During the first three months after a spouse walks out, the other spouse (male or female) is usually virtually incapable of focusing on work. Once the reality of divorce is accepted, it is possible to regain one’s attention span.
ATTITUDE COUNTS

Although it’s tough:
• Refuse to feel guilty about having to work, and don’t be apologetic about it. Study after study has proven that children do not necessarily suffer either emotionally or intellectually because they live with single parents who work outside their homes.
• Be aware that your own attitude about working is the strongest factor in your children’s acceptance of the situation. They won’t resent your job if you don’t; they won’t feel envious of friends who have a home-based parent if you don’t bemoan your fate.
• Involve the kids in your job in whatever ways you can. Let them visit you at your workplace, if possible, or at least see the building and meet some of the people you spend your working hours with.
• Leave work at work. Make the hours you spend with the kids count by giving them your full attention and doing things together that you all enjoy.
• Let your school-aged child know about the restrictions your job will put on your participation in school events. Let him or her have a voice in selecting which activities you will be able to attend.
• Build into your budget some minor indulgences, such as meals out, movies, trips to places of interest. Remember that kids need a parent, not a Santa Claus or entertainer. Breakfast out in a restaurant is as much fun as dinner, and it will cost less. An afternoon the roller skating rink may be more enjoyable for everyone than attendance at a costly theater production.

Many parents also throw themselves into their jobs, especially during times they don’t have their children. It’s a satisfying and good short-term coping mechanism to escape the pain. Many women, especially, are often forced into long working hours out of economic necessity. Often, keeping work in perspective is not easy.
The hardest is when you’re in an important meeting at work and can’t leave and the school calls about your sick child. Those are the days when I feel like I’m wearing a sign that reads It good career woman-bad mother. “These do get balanced out, fortunately, by the times I do stay home with my child and feel the guilt of “bad career woman-good mother. “
-Susan Beatty, New Canaan, CT

MAKING TIME WHEN THERE IS NONE

Life goes on. Laundry has to be done, food must be shopped for—and all with less time than you probably had available to you before. Your emotional paralysis and the counseling you are attending will limit your time and resources even more. Just as when your children were firstborn, some things just won’t get done for now. Remember, no one “has it all together,” so:

• Set up a schedule for household chores and errands, delegating whatever tasks the kids are able to handle. Keep it loose enough to allow for the emergencies that will surely arise. And be flexible enough to throw that schedule to the wind once in awhile and do something unexpected and fun.

• Use chore lists and written messages as two of your best organizational tools.

• Consider having a live-in student or boarder, hiring a mother’s helper or housekeeper to ease your time limitations and add continuity to everyone’s life. For some, communal living arrangements work.

• Take time to set your priorities. Do the “musts” and let the “shoulds” and “coulds” wait.

• Use the phone or the mail for shopping whenever you can. Run errands as infrequently as possible, combining them into a single trip.
• Relax your standards about housework and cooking. It’s not important right now that your house be immaculate at all times and your meals all be gourmet quality. A study from the East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, found that divorced mothers spend as much time with their children—and sometimes more than when they were married. How? They spend less time on housework and personal leisure.

• If the other parent has the kids part of the time, let those be the days or weeks you catch up on work around the house—but also those in which you spend some time on yourself or with friends.

• Develop friendships with other single parents with whom you can trade or share transportation and childcare responsibilities.

WE CANNOT MAKE LIFE EASIER. WE CAN ONLY MAKE OURSELVES STRONGER.

I will always be grateful to the interview I heard with a foster mom with a houseful of kids who commented that “Life is too short for sorting silverware.” —Tamara Kent, Portland, OR

SCHOOL, KIDS, AND DIVORCE

The effects of divorce on behavior and school performance differ from child to child. Some have a very hard time, fail academically, ignore teachers’ and counselors’ efforts to help, refuse to participate in anything not required, and lose friends because of belligerence or apathy. It’s really because school is hard to manage...
when you’re grieving and in pain. Other children look upon school as a lifesaver. They become immersed in studies, activities, and friendships as an escape. Some even find the chance to talk with teachers, counselors, or friends about the divorce a way to unload; others may prefer to keep family problems at home and look upon school as a place to relax and forget them.

Teachers will assume kids live with both parents unless they are told otherwise. So tell them what the situation is and let your child know you will be informing his or her teacher. That doesn’t mean your child will be happy that you’re letting their teachers know. In fact, don’t be surprised if they are angry-initially-because of their own sensitivity and embarrassment. Still it avoids minor discomfort for teacher and child during the school year. Be sensitive to the personality of your child’s teacher. Not all will be sympathetic. If necessary, choose a counselor, nurse, secretary, or anyone you know there who is most likely to be helpful to your child. The sooner you do this, the better.

*My first reaction was to keep it a “secret. “ But it was only one week before my son’s preschool teacher asked if anything had changed at home. He had become inattentive and bully-ish. I realized I had to enlist their help so he could cope better. They did and he did.* -Karyn Herrmann, Minneapolis, MN

**CHILDREN OF DIVORCE IN THE CLASSROOM**

The good news is that a child of divorce is definitely not an oddity in a classroom today. He or she has plenty of company. It’s not unusual to find 40 to 50 percent of children in a classroom have experienced divorce in their families. Peer pressure or the stigma of the “D
Looking Down the Road

word” will not be an issue. Regardless, children may feel self-conscious, isolated, and embarrassed. There’s often some bad news in the beginning. Children are, of course, upset by the trauma of divorce in the family. Their lives are changed and there are bound to be some initial problems in school as well as at home. A 1986 study by Dr. John Guidubaldi at Kent State University found that lack of structure at home and fears about financial security are seen as the major reasons that children of divorce have more problems in school than do other children. Stress from home usually affects a child’s ability to concentrate. Kids will daydream, become inattentive, and may have trouble completing assignments. Parents who are alert to signs of trouble can often help a child make a quick adjustment to life at school through discussions, changes in their parental behavior, or with professional help.

In general, children in single-parent families do not do as well in school as their intact family counterparts. But other studies have shown that the kids of divorced parents don’t necessarily have continuing problems in school, though for some reason, boys are more likely to be classified as “low achievers” than those from intact families. Mothers who worry about returning to work will find comfort in knowing latchkey children do as well as others academically, and often become more independent and resourceful as well.

If your school or PTA offers student group counseling sessions during school hours, encourage your child’s participation. Kids benefit from hearing others expressing their feelings and from having a place to vent their own. If your school doesn’t have such a project available but is open to the idea, the following are good contacts: Interact, PO Box goo, Ft. Atkinson, WI 53538, 800-359-0961, publishes a manual of a model program called Banana Splits: A Peer Support Program for the Survivors of Divorce Wars. Another peer support program is RAINBOWS, started by Suzy Yehl Marta, in 1983 that operates thousands of sites in almost every state where kids come together in a 12-week program-in churches, schools or synagogues with
a trained volunteer facilitator. Two additional age-directed programs are available: Spectrum-for high school kids, and Kaleidoscope-for adults over 19. For information contact RAINBOWS, 2100 Golf Rd #370, Rolling Meadows, IL 60008, 847-952-1770/800-266-3206 (www.rainbows.org).

THE RIGHTS OF THE NONCUSTODIAL PARENT

For many parents, the communication line to school is severed by separation. One parent no longer has automatic access to a child’s school life. Even with open parenting arrangements, there is usually an information gap so that one parent is at the mercy of the child’s memory or the goodwill of the other parent.

Society is recognizing that divorced fathers have both rights and responsibilities in connection with their children, particularly under joint custody. The Family Education Rights Act Of 1974 gives the noncustodial parent access to pertinent records. The Federal District Court in Albany, New York, in 1985 upheld a father with joint custody’s request to receive duplicate copies of all school information mailed to his former wife, who had custody on school days. The decision did not cover handouts the children carried home. Prior to that, his only recourse was the federal law that does mandate that schools make a child’s grades available to both parents, no matter what kind of custodial arrangements have been made.

To help take the pressure off a child:

- Share and talk about school decisions immediately to avoid setting up a noninvolvement pattern.
- Be very careful to pass copies of school information and report cards from one joint custody parent to another when a child changes homes, so that
each parent is aware of special happenings. Request that routine school notices, newsletters, and other mailed information be sent to both parents.

• Be sure the school has phone numbers and addresses (work and home) for both parents in their files. Both phone numbers should also be listed in the school student directory, even if you wish to list just one address.

• Remember to include examples of schoolwork when your child goes to the other parent’s home.

• Encourage your child to share good school news with the other parent by phone.

• Arrange pickups by a noneustodial parent or changes from residence between parents with joint custody in a way that causes the minimum of disturbance. Teachers have noted that Mondays and Fridays, when changes of residence have either just taken place or are about to occur, are often harder days for some children of divorced parents.

• Consider joining the PTA yourself. It’s a good way of staying in touch and involved.

• Be aware that come graduation there is often a limit of two tickets per family. Compromises or separate seating options must be made if you can’t tolerate your ex-spouse’s company on such a nice occasion.

**SCHOOL CONFERENCES**

Make every effort to attend parent-teacher conference-either together or separately. Teachers will often make time for those extra conferences if parents are too uncomfortable together. Ask for a time change if you cannot meet during school hours. Don’t hesitate to request additional meetings whenever you feel they’re necessary. Even in the midst of your pain, you might be surprised at how nice it feels to talk with a third party about your wonderful child. Relationship and money
concerns can be put aside and you and your ex can enjoy the good thing (your kids) that you do have in common. Set up school as neutral territory. Don’t turn an open house into an open confrontation.

We tried a shared conference and it was a disaster. The teacher offered us separate conferences the next time and it was helpful and beneficial for our son, too.-Karyn Herrmann, Minneapolis, MN

Our shared conference went well. We also used this time to inform some of the teachers of the divorce. -Toni Richardson, Hopkins, MN

Make sure that your child understands that although joint conferences are a shared parenting responsibility of adults, they are only that. Children having reconciliation fantasies often “act out” at school, knowing that Mom and Dad will respond by going to school together.

It’s up to parents to supply the details that will allow school personnel to do their best. Conferences are the place to fill in the teachers if you have not done so before. You don’t want to put your child’s teachers in an embarrassing situation when they say, “Ask your father,” who may live 1,000 miles away or when they address a stepfather incorrectly. Keep your school informed.

• Ask to be contacted about problems or behavioral changes.
• Check to see whether the school offers counseling services or classes.
• Let the teacher know whether to contact one parent or both.
• Advise teachers of your custody schedule in general so they will be understanding of any glitches that may occur.

Regardless of your parenting arrangements there will be after-school activities that your child will want
Looking Down the Road

both parents to attend, whether soccer, Little League, Open House, or the class play. The first few times are the hardest but you-and all the neighbors-will soon get used to seeing you (a) talking to each other at these events, (b) not talking to each other at these events, (c) sitting together, (d) sitting or standing at opposite ends of a stadium or arena, (e) bringing along a significant other, (f) never bringing along your significant other, or (g) alternating events so that you never show up at the same ones together. It doesn’t matter which of these options you choose, but it is important that you do show up, for your child’s sake. It’s sometimes difficult, but it gets easier if you work at it.

I don’t think you ever lose the “radar” that lets you spot your former spouse across a field of 500 parents. But, also, your child will remember your absences (either parent) if you don’t show up. Conversely, these same kids will not always remember the times you did show up. (There is no justice—sorry!)

FAMILY ADJUSTMENTS

Among the most important and most difficult adjustments a divorced parent must make are those that concern personal relationships. First, of course, are those with the children. Then there’s the former spouse-and the other parent. You’ll always be connected to your ex through your children. The better you can manage a new kind of partnership, the more the kids will benefit.

Then there are the grandparents. As well as having a right to two parents, your children have a right to two sets of grandparents, if they’re living and if there’s no real reason why they should be avoided. (Most grandparents feel they have a right to their grandchildren, too, no matter what the circumstances of the divorce, and they’re beginning to be quite vocal about their feelings.) Other members of the family have to be considered, too—siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles.
on both sides of the family. If you’ve been close to all those folks and seen much of them, there is bound to be a certain awkwardness, if not real problems during and after a divorce. At best, those great gatherings on holidays are probably over, and your close friendship with your husband’s sister or your wife’s brother becomes strained. Unfortunately, the two sides of the family often split down the middle, siding with “their own.” The answer for many divorced parents is to find or create a new extended family, a support group made up of old and/or new friends who share some of the same kinds of experiences and are available to help in emergencies.

_We had two first cousins marry. When they divorced they split the family in half as everyone had to take sides._ -Unsigned

“All single-parent families do not come in one flavor-weak. There are as many varieties as among two-parent families._ -Ellen Goodman, The Boston Globe

**GRANDPARENTS, AND THE “OTHER” GRANDPARENTS**

Divorce dramatically and quickly changes the role of grandparents, so naturally they will have their own adjustments to make. Sometimes they are called upon for financial aid, for temporary housing, for babysitting services, and are expected to give advice only when asked for it. Grandchildren may disappear from their lives or try to take over their lives. Your divorce is not just your divorce—it’s theirs, too. They didn’t opt to divorce their grandchildren so you need to see to it that it doesn’t happen.

Grandparents give kids a sense of continuity and the awareness of belonging to a larger and interesting
family. They’re usually available to love a child and to listen, and kids sometimes find it easier to confide in them than in a parent. The elders can also fill in for an absent parent, giving him or her the gift of time off without worry. Of course, not all grandparents measure up to that ideal. Even your own parents may disappoint you by withholding their support or by siding with your spouse. Or, with the best intentions in the world, they may begin to treat you like a child and try to assume some of your responsibilities. Your in-laws may side totally with their own adult child or choose to take no sides except those of their grandchildren. Some disenfranchised grandparents may be militant about their rights as grandparents. Often in the event of sole custody or conflicting loyalties, they may ignore your children unless you encourage a relationship.

Your relationship with your spouse’s parents will change. That doesn’t mean it will change for bad or good, only that it will be somewhat different. The form that difference takes will only emerge with time. Grandparents are unsure of their role after divorce. Their choosing to remain neutral may seem like a lack of caring to you but it is often their best option. It’s important to keep family ties intact:

• Deal with your own parents as logically and compassionately as you can. If they’ve been supportive and helpful before, and seem not to be now, they’ll probably come around once they realize your divorce is real and you still love and need them. Grandparents have to deal with their own embarrassment and sense of loss. Give them time to deal with their own emotions and disappointments. Remember, they weren’t consulted about your divorce.

• Make the first move—and the second, if necessary toward keeping your in-laws in your children’s lives, if not your own. The worst that can happen is that you will be turned down, and in that case, you’ll know you’ve tried. Consider going the extra mile if you wish to continue the relationship with the former in-laws for the kids’ sake, and try
again after a cooling-off period of a few weeks or months. Time heals; circumstances change.

- Don’t allow yourself to feel guilty if the hostility continues and the relationship ends completely. It may actually be best in the long run. The kids will eventually realize that, although it will hurt at first.
- Don’t use grandparents (in-laws, especially) as your confidants. Keep them out of your divorce.
- Be sensitive to the needs, wishes and limitations of grandparents when it comes to childcare.
- Never threaten to cut your children off from their grandparents; doing so will only heat up unnecessary battles.

Kids can get caught in the loyalty binds between parent and grandparent just like they can between parent and parent. Watch your words.

**SINGLE PARENTS AND THE HOLIDAYS**

The more importance your family has attached to holidays and the more elaborate your preparations have been, the harder it will be to break traditions and make drastic changes. Unless your ex-spouse has pulled away entirely from the family, he or she will undoubtedly spend some holidays with the children and you will be alone for some of them. Plan for those days as carefully as you do for the ones when the kids are with you. Try to make them as different from the old days as possible: visit friends in another town, go on a skiing or hiking trip with other single people, do something you’ve never done before. Consider community service.

The first holidays with your new family structure are the most difficult, whether your children are with you or their other parent. That’s the bad news. The good news is there is only one first time for each holiday. You’ll survive each “first,” and it will get better each succeeding year. Small comfort, I know. Turning the lemons into
lemonade takes a bit of planning and effort. Don’t carry the burden alone; share feelings with your children if they are old enough and let them help with your plans. And if they feel their own sadness, let them voice these feelings, too, for they are normal.

CHILDREN OFTEN FEEL THE INTENSE PAIN OF NOT BEING ABLE TO SPEND HOLIDAYS WITH BOTH PARENTS TOGETHER.

DIVIDING THE HOLIDAYS

Consider every possibility before you settle on the holiday divisions that work best for you. It’s logical that the kids spend Mother’s day with Mom, Father’s Day with Dad, and visit for respective birthdays. But there is also July 4th, Labor Day, Memorial Day, and President’s Day to think about. Other big days (Easter or Passover, Christmas or Chanukah, and Thanksgiving) are a bit harder to handle. Some divorced parents alternate holidays each year, others divide the more important ones, alternating even this division from year to year. Keep in mind that for a holiday like Christmas, waiting “until next year” to celebrate with Mom or Dad is a very long wait for children. In some families it works best if the children spend certain religious holidays with the parent who is most involved with their church or synagogue. Examine your holiday traditions. You may discover that you have continued to do things you don’t like just because you have always done them. Now is a good time to make changes:

Make decisions about “who-gets-whom” and “who-goes-where” as far ahead as possible, and tell the children so they will know what they are doing. Ask teenagers for their input, keeping in mind that they may want to spend some of their holiday time with
friends-without either parent. A well-planned schedule is especially important the first year.

- Celebrate the eve of the holiday at one home and the day of the holiday at the other. Children often like this best because they get double the holiday fun, which makes up for what they have lost in family unity.

- Consider separating the children so they can share the holiday alone with one parent. You can switch midway through (if proximity allows) so each child has some time with both parents. We often put the burden of family togetherness on children by assuming that if they are together at the holidays, then at least some part of the family is “intact,” but children often enjoy being singletons. Separating them is also one way of insuring that neither parent will be alone.

Children like having both parents together on family occasions if the parents are comfortable enough in each other’s presence to handle it and are not feeding into reconciliation fantasies. Perhaps the “gift” of occasional togetherness can work for your family more easily when it is the child who is being celebrated, as happens on birthdays. If your ex is coming over for a family meal, make it a buffet to avoid the problem of who will sit at the head of the table, or go out to eat where it’s on neutral ground.

_I had one Christmas morning without the girls, and I was extremely depressed. His family celebrates Christmas on Christmas Eve so that hasn’t happened since. I don’t mind them being gone on Christmas Day or any other holiday “day, “ but I don’t like waking up on Christmas or Easter morning without them. Any other holiday is okay._-Margaret Leduc, Romulus, MI
HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

- Start new traditions. Let your children help you come up with new ideas. Will it be caroling visiting grandparents or friends in a nursing home? If you always opened gifts Christmas day, open them on Christmas Eve this year. Make sledding on New Year’s Eve a new annual event. The nice thing about “new” is that it doesn’t have to mean “less” or “damaged.”

- Discuss past celebrations and traditions if the kids want to. Acknowledging these memories validates a child’s feeling that it’s all right to yearn for or mourn former times. Keeping some traditions, and perhaps modifying them slightly, can provide a sense of continuity and comfort.

- Change the scene, if you can. Spend the holidays someplace you’ve never been—especially if you won’t have the kids with you over the holidays. But do try to go to a place where you won’t be alone. That can be depressing. Try to find a friend or relative you can visit or travel with.

- If you can’t get away, at least go out to eat and to the movies or do something you enjoy. Have you always wanted to see “The Nutcracker” or “The Little Match Girl,” but never got around to it? Do it now! Again, don’t go alone if you can help it.

- Coordinate, if possible, gift choices with your ex. Children may be happy with two of the same gift, but you may not be.

- Encourage them to call their other parent.

I decided we would start a tradition of making cookies and fudge together for Christmas. Christopher talked about the fun we had for weeks.—Karyn Herrmann, Minneapolis, MN
HOLIDAY GUIDELINES AND ALTERNATIVES

Be cautious about providing more excitement than the kids are used to (especially younger cones). “Two of everything” may make things even, but may also be exhausting. Some parents feel, however, this offsets the “unfairness” kids must tolerate in a divorce and becomes one of the “advantages.” Be sensitive to visiting grandparents’ needs but don’t err in the opposite direction doing everything others expect and not meeting your own needs. Don’t let competition about holiday visits become an undue burden for a child to please a parent, either now-or years down the road.

Form a support group. With just a little luck, you may find another single parent whose kids are compatible with yours, and you can share holiday meals and celebrations. If you’re going to be alone, invite other single parents to join you for a holiday meal or part of the day.

Participate in the activities of your church or synagogue; if you don’t belong, join. Don’t be afraid to replace previous family ties by tying into a religious community—there is nothing hypocritical about it. Don’t feel guilty about not giving children everything they ask for. They don’t need it. One—maybe two—special items won’t get lost in the shuffle. Don’t be apologetic about making major changes in gift-giving habits and celebrations if finances are tight. An honest discussion about available dollars will assure a child that cash, not love, is the issue. You will find that children enjoy making gifts and setting up new, less materialistic traditions. Above all, be good to yourself. Spend time with your children, perhaps more than you usually do, but save some time and energy for your own hobbies, activities, and friends. The holidays are for everyone—including you.
Looking Down the Road

Be tolerant of the other parent being excessive with gifts. An out-of-the-house parent will often do this to score points with the kids. Don’t interpret this situation as a personal statement against you. Don’t let yourself feel competitive or less worthy, if you are less able-or even unwilling-to provide expensive gifts.

PREPARING FOR LONG-DISTANCE HOLIDAY VISITS

Holidays are frequently times when children make extended visits to their noncustodial parent’s home. Often both parent and child have a fantasy of a perfect visit, which is hard to achieve. It is a good idea to keep to a relaxed pace on a holiday visit and not try to fit a year’s activity into one or two weeks. For children, it can be a time of anxiety and ambivalence. They wonder if they will fit in, if they will be welcome, and how it will be to be away from their primary home. If there are new “family” members, how will everyone get along?

You might want to practice some overnights away for a child not used to being away from home. Try a friend who lives close by or a relative’s house.

Parents can also reduce pre-visit tension that children often feel by:
- Being specific about dates and travel plans, with any tickets purchased well in advance.
- Being positive and involved in the visiting preparations and urging your ex-spouse to do the same.
- Planning on your child taking along some favorite familiar items, from toys and stuffed animals to books, on visits.
- Discussing and planning for phone calls home. Calling home should not be a cause for a child to feel divided loyalties. A child’s need to “check in” should not be viewed as a sign of unhappiness with the visit or competition by the parent being visited.
• Preparing personal space for a child so that he or she has a personal “turf.”
• Discussing house rules and expectations, which may differ from the other parent’s house.
• Preparing a holiday meal, if you are the noncustodial parent, may be more work than you realize. Enlist your children’s support and help in planning and preparation.
• Sending kids back to their other home with clean clothes and some new items to remember you by.

When it comes to farewell time, remember that a long good-bye hug, wishes for a good visit and trip, and reassurance of your love—as opposed to a teary or bitter send off—are what children need, no matter whose house they are leaving.

One twenty-two-year-old woman whose parents were divorced when she was six told me she wept with relief when she finally spent one Christmas with a friend’s family. It was the first Christmas in sixteen years that had not included a plane trip, because each parent “loved” her so much that they wanted to spend at least part of every Christmas Day with her.-Unsigned

**BIRTHDAYS**

Give careful attention to plans for the kids’ birthdays; they’re very special days for children. They may be the one celebration both parents find they can share in. If one parent has the party, maybe the other can be a guest or just drop in for a short time. If you’re sure this won’t work, consider alternating years for the group party and let the parent who does not have the party do something else special.
GIFT-GIVING

Few things are harder to deal with than a child taking a gift you gave him or her to the other parent’s house. It’s important to bite your tongue in such situations. The fact that children can transport possessions freely between homes is a positive sign of their comfort level with two homes. Don’t detract from that. If you are the noncustodial parent, give gifts that will last to keep you remembered to your child. That doesn’t mean they should be extravagant. In fact, it’s not a good idea to set yourself up as the indulgent parent. Elaborate and expensive gifts aren’t good for kids; they flame the fire of discontent in the heart of a former spouse who may not be able to give something of equivalent value. Instead, try:

- Magazine subscriptions of your child’s choice and interest level as a way to “connect” monthly.
- Sending flowers for a birthday, or to mark a special occasion. This appeals to girls of any age.
- If you’re in a quandary about what to give, ask your child or your former spouse.
- If you want to give an expensive gift, consider having the other parent be part of the decision. It will lessen hostility and competition.

Give gifts when they are due. Timeliness is almost as important as the gifts themselves. A gift a month late tells your child that he or she is not really that important to you. And don’t give teenagers expensive gifts if you haven’t given them basic support for other things that are important to them; it only breeds hostility.

One friend told of her college-age son asking his dad if he would mind returning the $100 pen set he had given him for Christmas and instead give him a check for the same amount, which the son needed for rent. His dad agreed, took the pen set, but so far has not sent him the check.-Unsigned
MOTHER’S DAY AND FATHER’S DAY

Certain days of the year can be especially painful for divorced parents, but most often for the noncustodial parent. For the father, who is most often the noncustodial parent, Father’s Day can be especially difficult. Even if he spends the day with his children, he is reminded that he does not play the same role in his children’s lives as he did before. Whereas these holidays were formerly spent as a family holiday, the mother on Father’s Day and the father on Mother’s Day will now be on their own. If you haven’t thought about this ahead of time and made plans for yourself, it can be quite a sad day when you are the “other” parent. You might be fortunate enough to have your parents nearby to share the day.

*I sent flowers to my wife on Mother’s Day after we had been separated for six months. Despite the fact that she initiated the separation and I was still dealing with the pain from that, I wanted to show my appreciation to her for being the mother of our children. And she is a wonderful mother to them. She was touched, and I’m glad I did it.*
-Walt Tornow, Plymouth, MN

*I invited all the single and divorcing women I knew to my house on my first Father’s Day alone-a day I was sure most of them would spend alone, too. It was wonderful. We did a round-robin discussion of our emotional state and concerns. That party became the basis for a group that met monthly for more than a year. We called ourselves the FDWs (Fabulous Divorced Women) and we were! As our needs dissipated and we strengthened, the group met less. Strong friendships and a lot of mutual support came out of the group. We still have an annual Father’s Day get-together.*
-Janie Jasin, Minnetonka, MN
Looking Down the Road

SPECIAL OCCASIONS REQUIRING FAMILY TOGETHERNESS

There are many happy family occasions that should remain enjoyable. Sometimes events occur very soon after a family has separated and divorced, others will occur in the future. Now special considerations are required that never would have dawned on us B.D. (Before Divorce). Occasions such as graduations, confirmations, bar/bat mitzvahs, and weddings all benefit from cooperation on the part of both parents. These events were seldom easy to plan when you were all together. Now there are additional conflicts and considerations. Regardless, swords must be turned into plowshares.

Financial cooperation varies greatly from family to family. “Fair” will be defined differently by each parent. Special occasions are an expense that falls outside of normal support payments. Even if one parent ends up paying for all or most of the event’s festivities, keep in mind that the trade-off is that plans can be made to fit that paying parent’s needs, tastes, and guest list. Regardless, the other parent should not be overlooked on such occasions because your child will resent the other parent’s absence. Ask your child for input when planning, and make your arrangements accordingly, even if it requires a lot of restraint on your part. Above all else, it is a day that should be one of good memories for your child.

If neither parent has remarried, you might talk about not inviting any significant (and especially, insignificant) others. Inevitably, one set of adults—if not both—will attend this occasion with a large knot in their respective stomachs. No one else (except for another divorced person) will have a clue about this. Approaching your ex first with a few friendly words actually helps put everyone else in the room at ease and it’s a worthwhile practice. (You can pat yourself on the back for this one!) If one parent is now paired off and the other is not, there’s all the more reason to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that are bound to surface.

For the children to celebrate their occasion with
only their original family is often nicest for them. And even if one parent has remarried or plans to be, there is nothing wrong with that parent attending an occasion unpartnered, if it can reduce any tension levels for that special day. Parents who divorced because of this now-acknowledged significant other will create different feelings than a new spouse that became part of the extended family several years after the divorce. Obviously each family will deal with this in their own way but it is important to keep in mind that there are many ways-rather than just one way-to celebrate such events. Family-of-origin bonds do not go away simply because a divorce has taken place. It’s not worth making them a test of any new marital connections. Remember:

- Invitations can be worded as coming from the child to avoid the problem of which parent or parent’s name to put on the invitation.
- You really don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do-despite traditions. You’re never going to please everyone. When you plan the event, be sure that you are one of those being pleased.
- If you can’t stop being angry at your former or exiting spouse, fake it! Pretense is just fine. That doesn’t mean that you must talk and socialize or even enjoy each others’ company. Just be polite.
- Discuss religious functions thoroughly with the participating clergy member. Some may have their own desire for the “big happy family.” If you feel uncomfortable with their suggestions, you may want to talk with someone not close to the situation for a new perspective.
- If your planning requires cooperation with another, set time limits. (“If I don’t hear from you by next Tuesday I will be ordering only xx invitations for the guests you wish to invite,” is better than saying, “Please get back to me.”)
- Keep it simple. The less you do, the fewer problems you’ll have.
The other family brought their cameras into the sanctuary and took pictures. It drove me crazy but I had to let go of my feelings of anger. If they were inappropriate in their behavior, it did not reflect on me. I wasn’t to blame and no one would consider me at fault—no matter how much it felt like that.
-Terri Newman, St. Louis Park, MD

CAMP VISITING DAYS

Sleep-away camp for summer vacation is a choice of many single parents for their children. Be sure your camp director is sensitive to a child from a divorced family. Young children often have irrational concerns about their custodial parents disappearing. Extra contact is important. Write more, call regularly, and be there for visiting day.

Parents who may have cleared all the other hurdles often find they have to communicate about sharing camp visiting days when they’d rather not. These are specific days and if you have to travel any distance, options to avoid each other are limited. But parents often forget that visiting days are hard on the kids—and maybe even harder than on the parents. Be sensitive to your children’s reactions.
- Don’t greet your child standing side-by-side with your ex. You don’t want to put a child in the position of whom to hug first.
- Be sensitive to the other parent who maybe taking videos and probably doesn’t want you on tape.

I knew he hated getting up early in the morning, so I’d arrive early and leave early. He’d arrive late and leave late.
-Jill Saunders, Boca Ratan, FL
Boy-and-girl neighboring camps often allow divorced parents to visit each child alone, alternating Saturday and Sunday of that weekend. The parent of the same-gender child (i.e., mother/daughter and father/son) will have a seniority status at camp, because that parent can be in the bunk at any time, whereas the other parent can’t. Most remote camps have only one nice hotel in the area. Only you can decide whether the comfort is worth the proximity to your ex-spouse. Similarly, when making a plane reservation, you can always check on the other’s reservation by calling (and acting on your spouse’s behalf) to confirm his or her reservation and then deciding which flight you’d like to take. Be creative. Your goal is to make your child feel loved without ruffling feathers unduly.

DATING, SEX, AND THE SINGLE PARENT

As most divorced adults eventually resume a social life, dating enters the picture. It is probably one of the more difficult things a child must become accustomed to. (It’s not easy on you, either!) A child’s usual reaction to Mom or Dad’s first date is a negative one. Some divorced parents who’ve weathered the storms say, “Make sure the first date you bring home is a throw-away rather than a significant one. A child never likes the first one.”

Rushing into dating threatens a child’s world. Your children may view your dates as competition for your love and attention and as a rejection of their other, now-absent parent. Their fantasies of reconciliation will be damaged; and the loss of your attention can reawaken fears of abandonment. Beware of letting yourself think that finding a new spouse will make your family “whole” again. Remarriage based on that agenda often has more “holes” than “wholes.” Be aware, too, that children are usually more accepting of Dad’s dating than of Mom’s dating. It’s hard to say whether it’s a sexist reaction or just that Mom, more often than not, is the caretaking parent and is expected to maintain the status quo.
Socializing with your kids along is one good way to approach the social scene. Parents Without Partners is a large, national organization that allows you this option. Or start your own family-to-family social group. It’s really not hard. Invite all your single-with-children friends over for some shared event, such as a brunch. Socializing with your kids takes the pressure off of meeting “someone” because you can always enjoy being there with your child(ren). If you think you don’t know enough folks in the category, simply let friends invite friends or acquaintances they may have heard about. Your network just needs a little nudge.

FINDING OTHER SINGLE PARENTS

There are friends, personal ads, dating services, singles groups, and clubs, to name just a few ways to meet other singles. Being single is a wonderful opportunity to meet people you don’t have to marry. You’ve already been married and have had kids. You did what society expected of you. Now you can meet new people and pair off or not as is appropriate without a mating agenda. There are wonderful single women and men who would love to know you. Enjoy the opportunity. And if it’s love you’re looking for, remember you have to kiss a lot of toads before you find your prince or princess. It’s mainly a percentage game!

PARENTS WITHOUT PARTNERS is perhaps the best-known of the organized singles groups, with 1200 local chapters in the United States and Canada, offering discussion groups, workshops, children’s programs, and social events. They publish a bimonthly magazine. For information write to: 1650 S. Dixie Hwy - 5th fl, Boca Raton, FL 33432 or visit: www.ParentsWithoutPartners.org.
For most, dating and sex the second time around is scary and stressful. Just because you’ve been married doesn’t mean you’re confident or are even experienced in this area. Becoming socially active again is important because it helps free a parent from becoming obsessive about his or her parenting role. Letting your adult life revolve around your child’s is actually very hard on your child. To help out, here are some dating do’s and don’ts:

- Meet your dates away from home in the beginning of a new relationship.
- Introduce dates as friends if your child resents your dating, explaining that parents need adult friends, too. Add a tag such as “so-and-so is my tennis partner,” or “a co-worker from the office.”
- Try not to have a slew of different dates running through your home and your child’s life. This lifestyle might be fun for you, but it’s confusing for and hard on children.
- Enjoy the benefits of shared physical custody, if you have it. You can perhaps confine your dating to the times the children are not with you. If you only have access to your children on weekends, there will come a point when they have to share in your dating life. Just remember that the longer this takes, the easier it will be for your children.
- Begin locking a bedroom door for privacy before you have someone spending the night so that option is available to you.
- Choose with care those “significant others” whom you let get close to your family. Children get attached to people you date over a long period of time, and these breakups are often harder on them than on the adults involved.
- Be prepared for scheduling problems when both parents with shared custody try to date.
- Letting your ex know your whereabouts when going out of town is a responsible act, but is not always done. If your ex will not give you a phone
number when planning to be away, suggest that he or she let you know who does know how to reach him or her should an emergency arise. (This is not the same as keeping tabs on your former spouse’s social life-consciously or unconsciously.)

Be prepared when your children attempt to sabotage your dates through a variety of rude comments, obnoxious behavior, and “forgetting” to pass on phone messages. You can let a child know that you understand what he or she is feeling, but make it clear that this type of behavior is unacceptable.

As for your sex life, do recognize that despite their knowledge and savvy, children are usually uncomfortable with their parents’ sexuality. It’s not necessary to reveal the sexual component of any relationship, at least until some commitment seems to be in the offing. You can avoid forcing your child to deal with this by taking an overnight trip, going to a hotel, or waiting until you have some privacy in your own home.

If spending the night with a date, I’d always tell the kids I would not be home, though not necessarily where I was. It was important to me to let the kids never think I might be deserting them.-Unsigned

Time is your best ally. Don’t be in a hurry to have your children participate in your relationships. If you find yourself feeling uneasy about having your “friend” stay overnight while your kids are around, don’t issue the invitation. Many parents go to elaborate lengths to keep their love life private, even when their children are in the house with them. There are as many solutions to finding private times as there are single parents. Be prepared, also, for surprising questions about your marital and premarital love life. Your kids may want to know whether you and Mom (Dad) slept together before you were married, whether you were monogamous in
marriage, or how many partners you may have had. Be as honest as you feel is appropriate. Teens, especially, may be looking for reasons to say no to peer pressure, so make your answers constructive for them.

_The first male friend I had over for dinner had to deal with my six-year-old daughter asking, “Are you going to marry my mommy?” “No, “ he replied, “I’m going to wait and marry you! “ -Susan Beatty, New Canaan, CT_

If your love life isn’t so hot, it can be agonizing to see your ex dating or in love. One underlying reason for your pain, as we all feel when uncoupled, is fear that we’ll never be loved again. It’s not true. Love comes when you least expect it. It arrives on its own timetable, not yours. It often comes after your heart has healed or when finding a partner is no longer a consuming objective.

**BUT YOU’RE IN LOVE**

The first time you do expose your kids to your love life there will probably be some uneasy feelings no matter how well everyone is prepared. Some parents discuss this possibility with their kids beforehand to help form their decision and/or timing; afterward is still time enough to ask your kids how they felt about your having an overnight guest. it’s a difficult situation because we want our children to see an honest, loving relationship that they can use for a model, but may be ambivalent or downright worried about their “getting the wrong ideas”-or even carrying your “news” to an ex-spouse. Then too, even seeing adults holding hands and kissing affectionately may add to kids’ embarrassment and confusion, rather than clarifying it. A love-struck adult who behaves like an adolescent blurs
the necessary differences between the adult-child relationship. Share your giggles, passionate excitement, or pining with friends-out of earshot of your children.

One study reports that divorced mothers living with men complicated their children’s adjustment. The kids don’t fare as well because they believe the new relationship to be tenuous and they’re unsure of the other man’s role. Kids are often embarrassed when their mothers have live-in lovers. And if they do become fond of the new man in Mom’s life, they are often torn by a sense of disloyalty to their absent father. And children resent-and understandably so-being told what to do by someone who is not their parent. This is true whether you are dating or are remarried.

Remember that whatever standard you expect of your children, you will have to live up to yourself. Teens are not going to be content to “do as I say, not as I do.” Dating does give you the opportunity to help shape your children’s dating standards. If they see you having dates or friendships that don’t necessarily involve sex, hear how you talk about your dates and what you like and don’t like about them, learn how you treat a date by where you go/how you are treated, you can help them form appropriate dating values and behavior.

Beware of the pitfall of abandoning your children emotionally when a significant other comes into the picture. Nurturing children often falls to the wayside in the flush of a romance. if you have developed a close relationship with your child or children when you were alone, your new couple relationship will threaten your parent-child relationship. Children will find ways to cope with a loss of attention. It might be negative behavior, withdrawing from the family, or even making an ally of this new person.

Time alone with your children becomes even more important when a couple relationship takes shape. Children usually resent lack of one-on-one time when visiting a parent who has a date. Finding a balance is difficult; no adult wants to spend all weekend, every weekend in the company of a 5- or 7-year-old. But the other extreme, that of having the children share all of a
parent’s time with another adult, competing for attention, is very hard on the children.

*Since my mom has married again, she’s so much in love that I’m just in the way.* -16-year-old daughter

**YOUR EX IS IN LOVE**

So you don’t like his or her new date. There is nothing you can do about having your child(ren) visit when your ex has a friend sleep over. It may be hard emotionally but you have to live with it. There is nothing that you should say about this, either. Feelings of being replaced by another woman or man are painful, albeit irrational. Children’s moral attitudes and values are not corrupted by such situations, if that is your concern. When your ex’s date becomes the mate, you may be surprised at just how painful that prospect is—even when you have no wish to reconcile. The best explanation is that it seems to be yet another and more final reminder that your marriage has ended. The only thing worse than hearing your ex will be remarrying from a third party is hearing the news from your ex. Obviously a no-win situation. And, by the way, don’t spend your ex’s wedding day alone unless you really enjoy digging a hole and crawling into it. Make plans. Do something special. Obviously the kids will be attending the wedding and they’ll be unsure of how to act toward, or deal, with you.

**YOUR REMARRIAGE**

A second marriage brings about a whole new set of considerations, as does step-parenting, if that’s part of the new marriage. Fifty percent of those divorced with children will remarry. Obviously, you shouldn’t
contemplate remarriage just so your kids can have a full-time, live-in mother or father. Second marriage fail at a higher rate than first marriages. More people are currently single or remarried than are part of an intact family. Thirty-five percent of American children now live in a step relationship, and it is predicted that more than half of all step relations will break up. These are sobering statistics. Seek family counseling before you remarry or merge families so you know what you will be facing and can develop some tools to use before problems arise. Discussion of topics such as discipline, money, inheritance, adoption of children, and custody concerns—if divorce occurs again—are just some that need to be covered. Think of pre-second-marriage counseling as taking out an insurance policy.

Remember that single parenting has many untoued advantages. Go slow. Marriage, as you may recall, seldom solves more problems than it creates. Children are generally better off, studies are showing, in one-parent families than in new “blended” families. Kids have fewer behavior problems when their divorced parents stayed single than when they reconciled or when the custodial parent remarried.

When a woman marries a divorced man with children she becomes connected to his former wife in a relationship we can call the “wife-in-law.” When the wife-in-law is good to your children, many such women have good relationships with each other.

There is an increasing number of children who are struggling to navigate repeated divorces and break-ups. Studies comparing families of multiple divorces have found that children with more family disruptions report higher levels of anxiety and depression, worse academic records and more troubled marriages of their own. The more breakups, these studies show, the worse kids fare.

Remarriage and step-parenting are topics that require whole books to themselves, and many have been written. If you are taking the plunge, use the books and resources available. Don’t think that love conquers all—you should know better from your last marriage.
FAMILY TIES THAT BLIND

When remarriage occurs, adults often bring to that relationship the desire for it to contain all the rights, responsibilities, and respect that is granted first time around for themselves and their new partner. A new wife, for instance, may be expected to attend a family occasion despite the discomfort it may cause her and anyone else. If one spouse says, “Accept me, accept my new partner,” it may prove to be a painful point of honor. Keep in mind that there can be a place for old family ties and a place for new family ties that can (if you can accept this type of thinking) make it easier for all concerned. Every event doesn’t have to be a paired affair. Be flexible. Keep in mind everyone’s comfort level on special occasions, especially the thoughts and needs of the child who will either miss your presence or face any added anxiety.

SECOND TIME AROUND

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THE STEPFAMILY FOUNDATION
333 West End Ave.
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BONUS FAMILIES
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Jann Blackstone-Ford
Looking Down the Road

RELIGIOUS CLOSURE

Marriage is a legal and, for many couples, a religious contract. The legal aspect of divorce deals only with practical details of custody and property. Many who divorce feel the need for a religious “closure” ceremony as well. It helps them to counter the emotional pain suffered by both the adults and children involved.

For Jews:

The Jewish religion has as part of its tradition a divorce ceremony called the “get,” which is also the name of the divorce document. The traditional ceremony is somewhat sexist in nature, because only the husband can divorce the wife, not vice versa. Other branches of Judaism have modified this ceremony to make it more meaningful for women who wish to include it in their divorce. The Reform branch has the “Ritual of Release,” which can be performed with a couple or just one spouse, if the other is uncooperative.

For Catholics:

The Catholic official process for religious closure is that of annulment. Catholics can take advantage of this process by contacting the parish priest or local Tribunal office. Annulment, which can only occur after a civil divorce, allows Catholics to reconsider the religious, sacramental nature of their marriage. The process takes six months to a year, and requires a person to work with their parish priest or a lay field advocate before a local Tribunal will support any conclusive judgment on the sacramental nature of that marriage. A church decision never denies the fact that there was a civil marriage. For that reason, a degree of nullity never makes children born to that marriage illegitimate. Instead, the decision focuses on the emotional and ethical considerations of marriage and divorce.

For an informative discussion on annulment, send for a copy of the Catholic Update reprint, Why the

For Non-Catholic Christians:
The United Church of Christ in 1987 became the first U.S. Christian body to authorize a ritual recognition for divorce. The UCC’s Book of Worship now includes a five-page “Order of Recognition of the End of a Marriage” to be conducted after a civil divorce. This includes the couple’s participation in a rite in which they recite words of regret and respect.

Whether children will participate in these ceremonies is a personal decision for both adults and children. Religious closure helps deal with the spiritual and psychological aspect of divorce. It’s about the only public acknowledgment of a divorce our society offers. But it’s important to remember that closure, even with a religious component, is never quite final when there are children.

_It was something I wanted to do but really couldn’t at first. We were both finally ready about four years after our divorce. Despite my Reform Jewish affiliation, a Reform “get” isn’t recognized by the Conservative or Orthodox branches and I wanted it to be done in everyone’s eyes-regardless-so we had the Orthodox ceremony. I didn’t have the children present as this was my thing, not theirs. During the procedure, I had a powerful flashback to our ring ceremony that had now come full circle. I was hit by the loss of that earlier dream. Later I sobbed and sobbed. It was a significant act of closure for me._

_Tamara Kaiser, Chevy Chase, MD_