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Solution-Based Psychological Services

Dealing with Divorce: 10 Tips to Protect Your Kids

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When a family finds itself in the middle of a separation or divorce, one of the first worries is "what about the children?" Divorce has been associated with multiple problems for children and teenagers including: poorer peer relations, low self-esteem, diminished academic performance, health problems, aggression, conduct problems, noncompliance, and depression. However, research has shown that while divorce can be hard on children, it's often the fighting of the parents that most directly affects the children, and the impact depends on how well the parents are able to isolate the children from these disruptions.

The following are 10 tips to keep in mind to help buffer your children from the problems they may encounter during parental divorce or marital conflict:

1. Never criticize your former spouse in front of your children. Children know they are "part mom" and "part dad," and the criticism can harm a child's self-esteem.
2. Don't use your children as messengers or quiz them about your ex-spouse. The less the children feel a part of their parents' battle, the better.
3. Reassure your children that they're loved and that the divorce isn't their fault. Many children assume that they're to blame for their parents' hostility.
4. Encourage your children to see your former spouse frequently. Do everything within your power to accommodate the visitation.
5. At every step during your divorce, remind yourself that your children's interests -- not yours -- are paramount, and act accordingly. Lavish them with love at each opportunity.
6. Your children may be tempted to act as your caretaker. Resist the temptation to let them. Let your peers, adult family members, and mental health professionals be your counselors. Let your children be children.
7. If you are the non-custodial parent, pay your child support. The loss of income after divorce puts children at a financial disadvantage and can affect them for the rest of their lives.
8. If possible, don't uproot your children. A stable residence and school life helps buffer children from the trauma of their parents' divorce. If you have to move, make an effort to have sleepovers and play dates with their old friends, and encourage new friendships too.
9. Try to minimize the child's exposure to fighting. Have your disagreements well out of earshot, and remember that kids are experts at listening in.
10. Finally, one of the most important things you can do for your children is to take good care of yourself. Your children need you now, more than ever, to stay healthy. Eat, sleep, and exercise well. Do not isolate yourself - spend plenty of time with supportive friends. If you start to feel overwhelmed, or if depression, anxiety, or anger persist, consider getting help from a therapist or support group. Family therapy can be helpful at times like these as well.

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A guide for parents based on the child's age.

(Note: There is significant overlap between these categories.)

How do I help my *preschooler* or *school-age child* cope?

- Most importantly, try to maintain consistency. Children going through separation and divorce need a lot of stability to anchor them during the stressful times of the early stages. Change as little as possible, especially at first.
- Do not alter the way you discipline and reward your child. Keep the routines the same (bedtimes, meals). Children feel safest when things are familiar.
- Be more affectionate. A few extra hugs go a long way during times like these. Don't overdo this, but a little more affection can make a big difference to children who are feeling scared or lonely.

How do I help my *school-age* or *middle schooler* cope?

- Help your children to stay connected. You should support your children's friendships and activities.
- Attention should be paid to enhancing or maintaining the quality of the parent-child relationship as a way to modify children's long-term reactions to marital disruptions.

How do I help my *adolescent* cope?

- For adolescents in particular, the significance of the frequency of contact with parents fades and it is the quality of the relationships that grow more central. The family, especially the parent-child relationship, has been viewed as the main source of support for the adolescent, acting as a buffer to help ameliorate some of the stress encountered during divorce.
- Do not use your teenager as an emotional confidant. Sharing the facts and feelings a child needs to know to be able to accept the divorce is not the same thing as discussing everything related to the divorce about which you may have a need to talk. Don't make your children bear this burden. They have enough to deal with already.
- Adolescents are more likely to have financial worries than are younger children. Adolescents are more aware than younger children about the limitations imposed by money. They suspect the divorce may have direct financial ramifications for them, and they're usually right.

At Lepage Associates our largest area of expertise is helping adults and children who are going through separation and divorce. There are many ways our psychologists can be of help during the process: communication consultant, child specialist, co-parenting consultant, parenting plan expert, support person/therapist. For more information on each of these roles, please see our article entitled "The Role of Our Psychologists in Separation & Divorce: Ways We Can Help," or call us for additional information or an initial consult. You can also find additional information on our website.

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