

The Dilemma of Parenting Through Divorce: How to Encourage Your Child's Relationship with Someone You Can't Stand Anymore!

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As a therapist that treats families going through separation and divorce, the most perplexing issues that I am confronted with (or more accurately bombarded with), are problems that occur when children are stuck in the middle of divorced parents who can't stomach the sight of each other. Kids need both parents, (even though many going through divorce may think you need your ex-spouse like a hole in your head)! Most people in the field of psychology and childhood development feel that for a child to reach their maximum potential, input from both a mother and a father is necessary. Some of us are beginning to question this, however, when we see children who are stuck in the middle of horrendous conflict between their two parents.

Studies have been conducted that show that kids who have more frequent contact with a non-custodial parent who is in high conflict with their ex-partner fare **WORSE** than kids who see that non-custodial parent on a less frequent basis. The reason for this is simple: The more opportunities these parents have to harangue each other during those times of exchanging their children, the more the children are witness to and caught in the middle of this conflict. Some have gone so far as to recommend that in these severe cases, the parenting time with the non-custodial parent is reduced to keep the child from the negative effects of their warring parents. Experts in the field are beginning to believe that keeping the child out of the middle of acrimonious parents supersedes the need for frequent contact, even if the parent is a great mom or dad.

This breaks my heart. This isn't the children's fault and yet they get the worst of the fall-out. There has to be a better solution and we all have to work for it, parents, therapists, attorneys and the courts. And I have a few ideas... So, here's how you can encourage your child's relationship with someone you can't stand anymore:

1. Let's begin with the recognition that for your child to have the best chance of growing up to be a functional human male or female, he/she will need both a mother and a father as role models and nurturers. This means that whatever good that parent has to offer should have some pathway of getting through to the child.
2. Be able to step back and look at your ex-spouse in the role of a parent. Many people make lousy husbands or wives, but they are terrific parents.
3. Remember that your child identifies with your ex-spouse. They have a shared history with this person just like you, **BUT**, they also have a shared present and future. Your ex-spouse is an important part of your child's life and just as you would help them to succeed in school or sports, it's important to help them succeed in this relationship.
4. Encourage the other parent to stay involved in the children's school and extra-curricular activities. Respect your child's needs to have both parents there for them, **WITHOUT**

having them worry that they are going to die of embarrassment if you both start to fight in public.

5. If you cannot be civil with your ex-spouse, then work out a plan so that your child does not have to witness your wrath. If exchanging the children is problematic, make another plan so that you will not have contact. Either arrange for someone else to send and pick up the children or arrange the exchange at a neutral place like a library or your local police station. The key is to let your children go back and forth between you with ease rather than going through a gauntlet of your venom for each other.
6. Get to work on resolving your feelings about your ex-spouse. I like to use this metaphor with my clients who are stuck in anger and pain: Yes, it's really hit the fan, and when it did you were standing right in front of it. Now you have to decide whether you want to spend the rest of your life sitting there stinking, or do you want to find a towel and start cleaning yourself up? That means if you can't get over this yourself, get some help. Other people are suffering besides you, and those other people are your children!

When a child is in jeopardy of being neglected, physically abused or sexually abused, all bets are off! These are the only exceptions we should have to make in keeping a child from seeing their parent without supervision of the visit. When there is this degree of dysfunction, the courts, the police and therapists are mandated to become involved to protect the safety of the child. In all other cases involving disagreements between divorced parents, the attempt to follow these guidelines must be made in the best interest of our children so that you can do what you supposed to do: BE A PARENT!

The bottom line in all of this is pretty clear: If you are more concerned about your children making a good adjustment to this divorce than you are in seeking revenge on your ex-spouse, then you'll put some real thought into some of the suggestions offered here. As Judge Edward Sosnick, one of the founders of the *S.M.I.L.E. Program, says, "the best gift you can give to your children in this divorce, is the right to love you both."