

# Kids and Divorce: Ten Tough Issues

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Children have an especially difficult time with divorce. Many times, parents neglect to consider the ramifications of the effects of the divorce on their children. Understanding how children will view the divorce and the resulting parental relationship is an important component to helping minimize the emotional turmoil of divorce for children.

## 1. **Children do not get divorced from their divorced parents.**

Respect this truth, for it manifests itself in many different ways and is a guiding principle for dealing with children. For a child, father is always father, and mother is always mother. There are no replacements. Even if a parent is “out of the picture,” in the children’s mind that parent is always part of the picture, both now and in the future. This needs to be accepted and addressed.

## 2. **Children will identify with their same-sex parent.**

These identifications are the building blocks of children’s personalities. Daughters will identify with their mothers, and sons will identify with their fathers — regardless of whether the parents are divorced. If children get the message “don’t be like your father” or “being like your mother will result in rejection,” then their development can stall — usually as they begin stepping into the adult roles modeled for them by their same-sex parent: spouse, parent, worker. Even if this parent’s example has been “bad,” children will identify, act similarly, and then, perhaps, try to remedy the “bad” that derailed their parent and led to their family’s breakup through their own relationships.

## 3. **Daughters will tend to secretly identify with “the other woman” and sons with the “other man.”**

Daughters want to be the “apple of Dad’s eye.” If Dad is more desirous of another woman or more interested in something other than the family (like being at the bar), the daughter will, at some point, want to explore this “other world.” The daughter will tend to keep this a secret from mom for fear of being “disloyal” to her. The case is similar for sons. It is helpful to bring this “secret” to light and to talk about it non-judgmentally.

4. **Beware of children “filling in the gaps.”**

Divorce can create “gaps” in the family structure and in the lives of both parents. Children will be drawn toward filling these gaps. Some will resist and pull away, often to their parents’ dismay. Some will get stuck in the “gap.” For instance, children will try to solve their parent’s loneliness. Sons may try to discipline their younger siblings — like a father. Daughters may become their father’s companion. When gap-plugging takes precedence over the child’s own personal development, then the plug needs to be pulled.

5. **Conflict can be especially intense if a child acts like a junior version of the divorced spouse.**

This can be interpreted as “disloyal,” “a stab in the back,” and the marital conflict can get replayed with the children as stand-ins. However, rather than a deliberate affront, the child is more likely shoring up his personal identity through identification or trying to keep the old family structure going through gap-plugging. If you are sympathetic and accepting of these motives, then you can probably work with your child in a positive way.

6. **Don’t lock into triangles and “go-between” set-ups.**

A “triangle” occurs when a third person is drawn into a one-to-one relationship: you and me against him. “Go-betweens” are third persons who are “in the middle” between two persons who should be dealing directly with each other. Children can “go-between” their divorced parents, trying to bridge the gap. Parents can put children “in the middle,” pumping for information or battling for “loyalty.” One parent can try to be the go-between for their ex-spouse and their child. Remember that strong one-to-one relationships are the best basis for post-divorce family functioning.

7. **Don’t confuse your concerns with your children’s concerns.**

Whenever you “feel for your children,” double-check about whether you are “projecting” your own feelings and concerns onto them. If you are concerned that your child is feeling abandoned, hurt or scared, try saying: “I am feeling abandoned, hurt, scared.” Deal with your feelings first. Only then will you be able to help your children if, indeed, they have similar feelings.

8. **Beware of trying to “make it up” to your children.**

Guilt is not a good basis for parenting. Parents need to return to “parenting” as soon as they are emotionally able — but it may not be the same parenting role as it had been prior to the divorce. For instance, the “soft parent” will need to do more “disciplining;” the “hard parent” will need to be “softer.” For some parents, this will be a welcome opportunity to explore their own parenting possibilities. For others, it may be difficult to incorporate new behaviors into their parenting. The soft parent may get even “softer,” “making it up to their children” (while drafting someone else to play the “hard parent” role), until they get so frustrated with their “spoiled darling” that they explode and become too hard.

9. **When children become adolescents, they may want to be with their other parent.**

This can be very painful for the custodial parent, who may take it personally. In most cases, however, the child's motive is to have a first-hand experience of their other parent, especially if there has been a separation. They may have been raised on the stories others have told them about this parent whom they have secretly idealized. The adolescent wants a "reality check." Also, adolescents may need to know if their custodial parent can make it without them, freeing them up to pursue their own development.

10. **Communicate values rather than insist on control.**

For various reasons, control over your children may become very difficult to achieve or reassert. It will help if you keep control of yourself. Be firm but patient. Keep asserting expectations: homework, tidiness, curfews, etc. But try thinking that there is something more important than control and that is the communication of your positive values. Even in the midst of conflict and defiance, and even if it doesn't look as if you are getting anywhere, don't give up. Your values will emerge in your children as their own values, especially as they become young adults. Keep your eye on the bigger picture and have faith.