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REDEFINING FAMILY, PART I

# THE BETTER DIVORCE: EASING THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

By Stacey Colino • Photography by Plamen Petkov



In the first installment of our three-part series on the changing face of families today, we share the new research that reveals how to keep kids happy and strong in the aftermath of divorce.



**D**ivorce affects more than 1 million children in the United States each year. The debate rages on about whether its enduring effects are always damaging (a point of view that has long been promulgated by Judith Wallerstein, Ph.D., the Marin County, CA, author of *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*) or less negative than previously thought (an argument made by Charlottesville, VA, psychologist E. Mavis Hetherington, Ph.D., in her recent book *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*). But what has finally been proven is that there are definite factors that help or hinder children's adjustment to the fracturing of their parents' marriage. "A divorce is a tremendous stress in a child's life, but how it's handled makes a big difference," says Constance Ahrons, Ph.D., senior scholar with the Council on Contemporary Families in New York City and author of *The Good Divorce*. Recent research highlights effective strategies parents can use to help children deal with the stress. They can be the keys to a smoother transition and a happier new family.

#### WORK OUT AN AGREEMENT TOGETHER

**U**sing mediation, a process of settling disputes with the help of an impartial third party (often a lawyer or therapist with training), instead of the adversarial approach in which lawyers battle out a settlement, usually in court, leads to a more

harmonious ending of a marriage—and a more cooperative beginning to the new state of the family. And the effects are long lasting. A recent study at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville found that parents who'd mediated custody disputes were more likely to remain involved in many areas of their kids' lives 12 years later than those who'd used litigation.

In mediation, a husband and wife negotiate their settlement with the assistance of a mediator—setting the pace, doing the work, and producing the ultimate agreement, and only then consulting an attorney to review the agreement for accuracy and sufficiency, explains Sam Margulies, Ph.D., a former litigator turned mediator who practices in Montclair, NJ, and Greensboro, NC. "The adversarial process has a polarizing effect on parents," adds Dr. Margulies, also the author of *Getting Divorced Without Ruining Your Life*. "It leaves them bitter and unable to talk to each other, and that's when the kids suffer."

Mediation, on the other hand, can often help parents work through their anger and grief together, says Virginia study coauthor Robert E. Emery, Ph.D., a professor of psychology, director of the University's Center for Children, Families, and the Law, and author of an upcoming book on children and divorce. "It gives parents the time they need to deal with their emotions without running away."

"Relatively speaking, mediation is a more amicable way to go," agrees a divorced father in Charlottesville, who used the process in 1996 to settle on joint custody of his now 9-year-old daughter. "It gives both parties the chance to state their case and listen to the other's without the heated back-and-forth there would be in a courtroom. And it doesn't involve issuing subpoenas to people who are close to you."

#### MAINTAIN STABILITY AND CONSISTENCY

**T**hese are the watchwords when it comes to how parents handle divorce. While many variables play a role in how divorce affects children, Dr. Emery emphasizes that these factors make the biggest difference: whether the child has a strong relationship with at least one parent and a good one with the other, the absence or containment of conflict between the two parents, and economic stability. "You want to give children all of those things in marriage *and* divorce," he adds.

In her research over the past 30 years, Dr. Hetherington, emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has found that having a competent parent can help protect kids from the potentially harmful effects of divorce. "Parenting skills decline during the stress of divorce," she explains. "A lot of parents think they can't be firm in their discipline because they feel

Parents who use mediation are more likely to remain involved in their children's lives than those who use litigation.



they've already put the child through enough. But kids need to have rules in the home and to have them enforced."

This not only helps children feel that, to some extent, life goes on in the usual fashion, but it also gives them a sense of security because they know what's expected of them. That is

what happened with Allison Bell, a divorced mom of two in Muncie, IN, and her ex-husband. "We both put the physical and emotional health of our kids first," says Bell. "After we split up, we backed each other up when it came to discipline. This helped the kids realize that some things weren't changing."

Research proves that consistency helps kids adjust to the new realities of their life. In fact, a recent study at Arizona State University in Tempe involving kids ages 8 to 15 found that those whose mothers exhibited acceptance of the divorce and maintained consistent discipline were much less likely to have adjustment problems than those whose moms had trouble accepting the change and being consistent with discipline.

Even with all that's known about divorce, there's an ongoing debate about what constitutes the best custody arrangement for families. A recent review conducted by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in Baltimore concluded that kids from divorced families who either live with both parents at different times or spend certain periods of time with each parent are better adjusted than those who live exclusively with one parent. "But if conflict is extremely high, joint custody exposes the child to chronic fighting," says Dr. Hetherington.

Since it can take months and sometimes even years to work out the kinks in a divorce agreement, keep as much stable in an unstable situation as you can, says Dr. Ahrons. For instance, it's better if kids don't have to switch schools immediately after a divorce. Some parents use what she calls the "birds' nest arrangement," where the kids stay in the family home and the parents take turns

**Kids whose mothers exhibit acceptance of their divorce and who maintain consistent discipline adjust more easily to the divorce.**

### STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: DIVORCE SUPPORT GROUPS

**Divorcing parents don't have to figure out the entire adjustment process on their own. Divorce recovery groups and parent education programs are available nationwide, and at least nine states (Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Utah, and Vermont) now require participation in these programs before a divorce is granted. Their aim: to help parents and children pick up the pieces after divorce and get on with their lives.**

The most widely offered parent education program in Massachusetts is Parents Apart. It takes place in five hours over two evenings, teaching parents about what kids typically experience when their parents are getting divorced and how to develop new arrangements. "We show slides of drawings that kids have made to

express their feelings about divorce," explains Joe McGill, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, who helped develop the program. "One depicts an airplane splitting in half. It was made by a child who was feeling groundless after his parents divorced. That really captures parents' attention because no one wants to see their kids express their feelings about family dynamics in that way."

Even those who attend these programs only because they're required often end up benefiting from them. "My ex and I get along really well, so I felt like I didn't need this class. But it was mandated by my county," admits M.J. Walker, a twice-divorced mother of four in Belmont, WI. After attending her required two

sessions earlier this year, she changed her mind. "It helped me reassess what's important and to be a better parent," Walker says. "Now I make more of an effort to take my kids on outings or to talk to them regularly when I'm not with them. I think more about how what we do or don't do will affect the kids in the future."

There are also programs aimed at children, such as Banana Splits, a nationwide support group for those whose parents have separated or divorced, designed to help kids sort out their feelings and create order out of the chaos that often occurs in their families. "Support groups are good for school-age kids because they can talk about their feelings," Dr. Ahrons says. "Kids often give each other suggestions and help each other be more resilient in this time of stress."

moving in and out on a weekly basis. It's logistically difficult, admits Dr. Ahrons, "but it gives the children some stability until parents can figure out what to do in the long run."

### DEVELOP A PARENTING PARTNERSHIP

**T**hinking that divorcing your spouse means you'll be rid of him or her for the rest of your life is naive. After all, when you have a child together, you're bound forever. Accepting that fact is an important step in making life easier for children. Many former spouses are now cooperating with each other like never before and, in the process, redefining their families.

Enter the parenting partnership. "Work toward a businesslike relationship where the rules are more structured and you are more formal and polite with each other," says Dr. Emery. The goal is to put aside your differences and grievances and focus on your child's welfare, making it your top priority.

About 25% of parents develop this kind of cooperative relationship, in which they talk regularly about what's going on

in the child's life and get together for special occasions such as the child's birthday, according to Dr. Hetherington. But this isn't always possible, especially if parents continue to hold grudges against each other. In about 50% of families, parents develop a parallel co-parenting style in which they don't interfere with each other but rarely communicate. "Although young children do better when their mother and father take a cooperative parenting approach, it's surprising how easily most kids adjust to parallel parenting," she notes. The remaining 25% of couples have high levels of conflict even six years later; this, of course, is distressing to kids and undermines their well-being, she says.

### FIND ARRANGEMENTS THAT WORK FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILD

**A** child's ability to adjust after a divorce depends heavily on whether her schedule is adapted to fit her needs as well as her parents'. "Because we make the children's feelings and stability our top priority, we don't always stick with the

In about 25% of cases, parents talk regularly about what's going on in their child's life and even get together for special occasions.

## THE DIVORCE CONTRACT: A COOPERATIVE TOOL



To take the guesswork out of how children's lives will change after a divorce, Jerry Brodly, Ph.D., chief of the department of psychology at Greenwich Hospital in Connecticut, often asks couples to draw up and sign a divorce agreement. "It gives kids a predictable schedule," he explains. "And it creates structure for parents in case they're unable to communicate." What follows is an abridged version of the contract.

1. Both parents understand that free and unhampered contact between the children and parents is in the children's best interest. Each parent shall refrain from doing anything to estrange the children from or to disparage the children's opinion of the other parent. Neither parent may do anything that may hamper the free and natural development of the children's love and respect for the other. Neither shall allow the children to communicate important information from one parent to another.
2. Both parents realize that it is in the children's best interest to spend reasonable, frequent, and liberal amounts of time with each parent. The agreed-upon schedule may be altered and used flexibly by mutual consent of the parents.
3. If one parent dies, full and unconditional custody shall revert to the living parent. This parent shall have full rights to determine the children's custody in the event of his or her own death. The parent shall provide reasonable visitation rights of the children to the deceased parent's own parents, sisters, and brothers.
4. If a parent is not available for a day or longer, the children will be with the other parent. This

- parent has the "right of first refusal" to be with the children instead of any third party (such as a relative or nanny).
5. Each parent shall keep the other informed of the children's whereabouts at all times, and each agrees that if either has knowledge of any circumstances affecting a child's health or welfare, he or she will promptly notify the other.
6. Each parent shall be entitled to complete, detailed information from any doctor attending the children and from any teacher giving instruction to them. Each parent shall be furnished with copies of the reports given by them.
7. The names of the children shall not be changed nor shall any of them be adopted without the written consent of the other parent.
8. The mother and father shall have joint decision-making powers on issues regarding the children. If the parties cannot agree on such matters, they shall resolve their dispute by referring the matter to mediation. If they are still unable to resolve the dispute, it shall go to binding arbitration. If the dispute involves psychological issues, a licensed psychologist agreed upon by both parents will be hired to mediate.

agreed-upon visitation and contact schedule,” says Allison Bell. “If they know the other parent is free to come and go in their lives, they feel more secure.” Indeed, “children who have flexible access to each parent tend to have less negative views of the divorce and fewer behavior problems,” notes Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D., a clinical professor of psychology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and author of *Divorce Poison*.

Be prepared to change your routine if it's not working for your child. “My younger son, who's 7, has difficulty with transitions,” says Randy Martin, a San Francisco father who has joint custody of his two sons. “He wants nothing more than to have the two people he loves most in the world together, so it's hard when one of us leaves him with the other.” The new system: His son now gets picked up and dropped off at school, since it's a common point for Martin, his ex-wife, and his son.

## SHIELD CHILDREN FROM HOSTILITY

**N**o matter how bitter former partners may feel toward each other, those feelings must be hidden for their child's sake. In addition to considering what's best for the kids as you make decisions, this also means making sure they don't become mediators in your disputes or confidants when you're upset. “When parents can focus on their children's needs instead of their own needs—and they don't expose children to conflict and make them feel caught in the middle—kids adjust a lot more easily,” Dr. Hetherington says.

It's also essential for Mom and Dad to be on their best behavior with each other and for kids to see that good behavior in action. “Kids are very tuned in to how you respond to each other, so we actually stage times when our kids will see us having a pleasant conversation,” says Sandra Thompson, a Columbus, OH, mother of two who separated from her husband in 1998 and is now getting divorced. “It doesn't matter what we're talking about; there's a presumption of respect.”

It's often hard to present a positive—or at least neutral—attitude toward an ex-spouse. After all, the hurt and anger that led to the divorce may still be raw. But denigrating the other parent within earshot of a child affects his self-esteem, says Dr. Ahrons. It can also frighten him because he may fear he's



For a family historian's thoughts on what we can do to lower the divorce rate, visit [www.child.com/web\\_links](http://www.child.com/web_links).

the next person to be criticized. What's more, this kind of behavior puts the child in the middle. "What kids want the most is not to have to choose between parents," she says.

Encourage your child to express his feelings about the divorce, and listen to what he has to say, as painful as it may be to hear. Because her son sometimes found it hard to open up, Jody Seidler, a single parent in Santa Monica, CA, would take walks with him. "I created a true-or-false game to help him share his emotions," she explains. "I'd say things like, 'I'm really sad about my parents' divorce—true?' And I'd get deeper and deeper with the questions. That really helped draw him out."

### CREATE A SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR YOUR CHILD

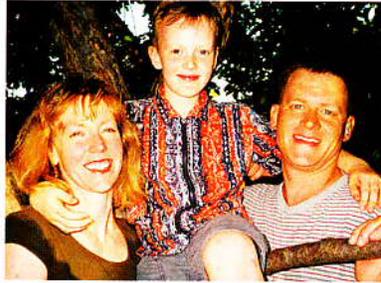
**Y**ou may find it too hard to hear the sadness and anger your child is feeling. If so, recruit another adult, such as an aunt or a teacher, with whom she can discuss the changes she's experiencing. Try to preserve all the positive relationships between your child and her relatives that existed before the divorce. "Too often after divorce, children lose touch with an entire side of their family," Dr. Warshak says. "This magnifies their loss."

Kids know they're supported when they have a system for airing their requests or grievances. "My younger child writes down things he doesn't like about the situation at my house or his mother's house, and a few times each month, the three of us sit down and discuss them," says Randy Martin. "We talk about what we can do. If it turns out we can't do anything about them, we've at least acknowledged his feelings."

Being willing to do your best to accommodate your child's evolving needs reassures him that he's loved and valued by both of his parents as much as ever. After all, for better or worse, divorce is a lifelong change that parents and kids will have to continue to adapt to. Experts liken the effect of divorce on children to a marathon, rather than a sprint. But it's a test of endurance that can be successfully completed if cooperation, creativity, flexibility, and sensitivity are exercised over the years. "It takes a lot of work to have a good divorce—and it's not work that ends easily," says Dr. Ahrons. "It takes time." ➤



## ONE FAMILY'S STORY: MAKING DIVORCE WORK



**Ethan Pettengill Miles, 8, may not live with both of his parents anymore, but they're each a constant presence in his life. When he goes between his mom's and dad's homes every two or three days, he'll see the other parent's picture perched prominently on his dresser. Come Halloween, the three of them go trick-or-treating together so that no one misses out on the fun. And when Ethan plays soccer, his parents sit side-by-side in the bleachers, cheering him on. This child-centered approach is a result of the careful planning of Ethan's parents, Lynate Pettengill, 35, and David Miles, 36, of the Lawrence, KS, area, who ended their 10-year marriage in 1997.**

Ethan was just 2 years old at the time, but he reacted strongly to the news that his parents were divorcing. "I told him that Mommy and Daddy couldn't be happy living together and that we would still be his mommy and daddy, but we'd have different houses," recalls Lynate, a life coach specializing in parenting after divorce ([www.livebignow.com](http://www.livebignow.com)). "He started hitting me, which was very upsetting. But I kept reassuring him that we'd always be there for him. I also worked with him on hitting the pillows instead of me."

Gradually, Ethan came to accept his new arrangement. He's with each parent on alternate weekends and stays with his father on Mondays and Tuesdays and his mother on Wednesdays and Thursdays. He can take an annual two-week vacation with

each parent, and he alternates holidays between Mom and Dad every year.

His parents tried to do everything possible to create a new support system for him, one that includes family and friends. "Because we've put aside our differences for Ethan's sake, it's become a very pleasant situation," Lynate says. "We're Ethan's biggest fans, so it's fun to share the soccer games. And we often use the time to talk about things like how a doctor's appointment went."

This has been a painstaking process. "At first it was hard to put aside the emotions from the divorce and focus on what was right for Ethan," admits David, a chemist. "Over time, those emotions subsided. Having support from family and friends and some downtime to myself made it a lot easier to handle the anger and bitterness." Meanwhile, Lynate was grappling with her own emotional fallout, as well as the financial challenges of setting up a separate household and trying to find an appealing part-time career so she could spend more time with her son.

Today the parents share what David calls "more of a business-type relationship." "We're both trying to do what's best for Ethan and that's what we always try to keep in mind even when we disagree," he says. "Some of our beliefs—about education, TV, and medicine—are pretty similar, so that makes things a little easier."

Above all, they've tried to shield Ethan from their conflicts. Whether they're getting along or not, both parents speak favorably about the other to their son. They also help him make cards and buy gifts for the other parent for special occasions.

Their efforts have clearly paid off. These days, Ethan often sings while he's getting dressed in the morning. He's thriving at school. And he's a cheerful child. "We're very proud of him," says his dad. ☐

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