In Your Child’s Best Interest: A Guide for Divorcing Parents
Michigan State University
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Anne K. Soderman, Thomas S. Eveland, and Mona J. Ellard, Editors
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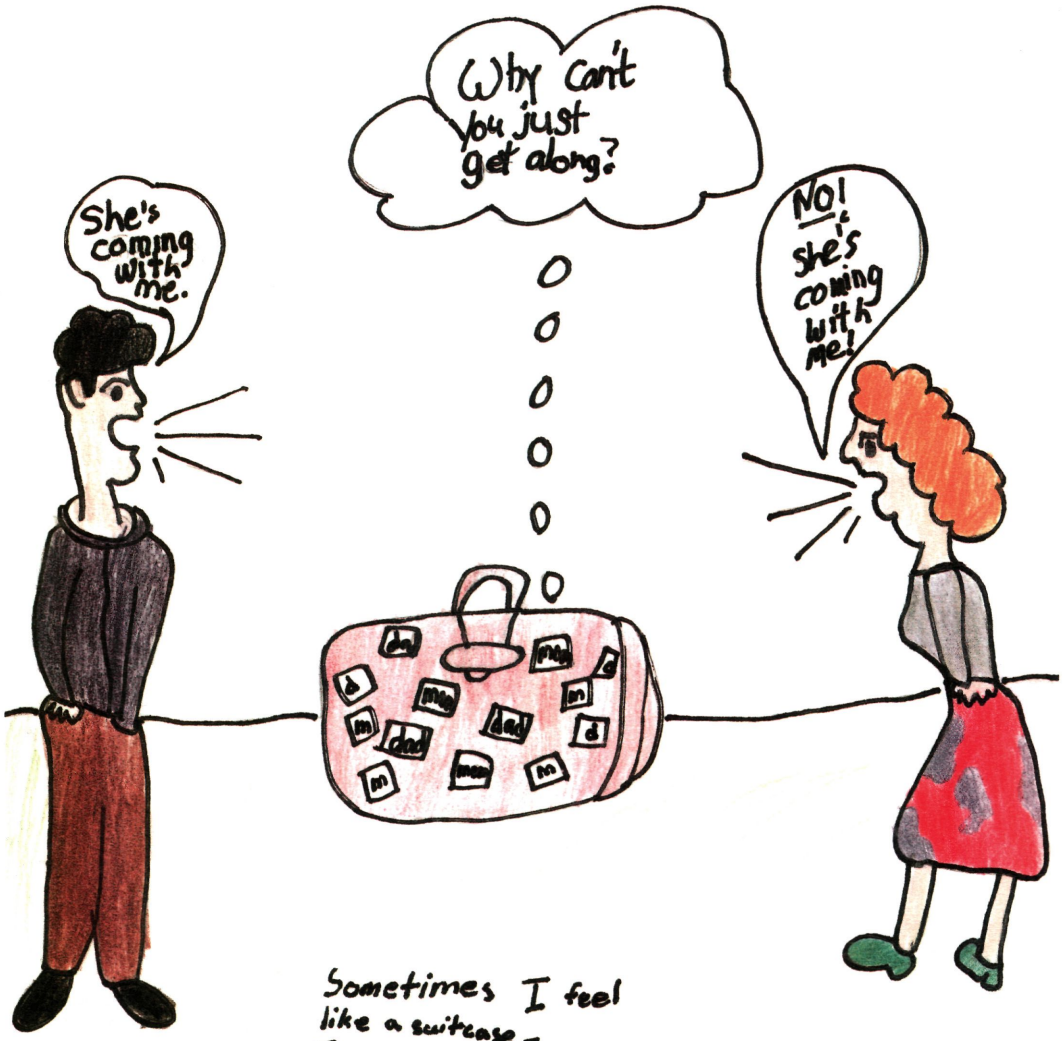
During the chaotic and emotional period of separation and divorce, parents may think it is impossible to cooperate with each other. It is a period of great pain, involving feelings of guilt and failure; the loss of security, friendship, and love; and the necessity of facing some of the less-attractive aspects of oneself such as revenge, bitterness, and great anger. For many, it is the hardest time of their lives....but if they want their children to grow into loving, caring, feeling people, parents *must* create a tolerable situation for them when they are young.

A healing affirmation parents might say to themselves is the following:

> **"My children are counting on me. What happened in the past is over. I will learn from my experiences, accept my losses, and create a new beginning for myself and my children."**

Florence Bienenfeld



Sometimes I feel like a suitcase -
I go to my dad's and get a sticker
then to my mom's and get a sticker!

How your children come through your divorce will depend on the relationship you reconstruct with your ex-spouse after the divorce. Parents' attitudes and actions make a big difference in how children adjust to the transition. We realize that not many parents are able to be friends after a divorce; however, we have found that when parents can be fair, civil, and businesslike in their dealings with each other, the unfinished business of raising their children *can* be productive. The primary purpose of this booklet is to encourage you as a concerned and loving parent experiencing divorce to rebuild both yourself and your family relationship in a new and healthy way — without destroying the lives of those you love — and in the best interest of your children. It *is* possible, and your children's future will depend on your finding a way to put their needs first, even in a time of great personal distress.

This booklet includes material originally developed by Lorraine N. Osthaus, Director of Family Counseling at the Oakland County Friend of the Court, in consultation with the SMILE Program developers and Friend of the Court staff in the 6th Judicial Court of Michigan. Appreciation is extended to The Honorable Edward Sosnick for permission to use this information in other Michigan counties. Information has also been included from *Divorce and Family Stress* developed by Anne K. Soderman for Michigan State University Extension and *Families First*, a support program developed by Beverly Bradburn-Stern and Richard C. Marley for Superior Court of Cobb Cunty in Marietta, GA. We are grateful to the children of St. Gerard School in Lansing, Michigan, for the illustrations that tell us so honestly about divorce from a child's perspective. We are also indebted to Patricia Potter, director of the peer counseling program at St. Gerard's, for her professional contributions and valuable insights. We hope you find the information helpful in making the divorce process easier for both you and your children.

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You can use this booklet:

- **As a resource for information about the various and specific ways children react to divorce**
- **As a guide to help you make effective decisions about custody and visitation matters**
- **As a reminder about the pitfalls of post-divorce behaviors that can hamper your healthy adaptation to family transition**
- **As a reference that will direct you toward additional sources of support and renewal**

Anne K. Soderman, Professor
Department of Family and Child Ecology
Michigan State University

Thomas S. Eveland, Chief Judge
56th Judicial Circuit Court
Eaton County
Michigan

Mona J. Ellard
Eaton County Extension Director
Michigan State University Extension

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LET HER DECIDE WHO TO BE WITH!
OH SURE!! SHE'LL JUST PICK YOU!
Please Stop!!

Introduction

As a divorcing parent, you are probably anxious about how your divorce will affect your children — and for how long. While it would be comforting to believe that "time heals all wounds," we now know that growing up *can* be more difficult for children of divorce. On top of normal developmental tasks, children whose parents divorce must cope with an additional set of tasks specific to the divorce experience. Understanding these tasks can give parents some direction in helping children do more than just live with with the pain, chaos, and stress that comes with divorce.

Divorcing parents are frequently caught in a dilemma: While they know their children need them more than ever, they often find themselves less emotionally available. Instead, their thoughts are centered primarily on how to deal with their own personal problems. For a time, that is natural. However, an inability to quickly regain a reasonable and effective focus on parenting often results in increased stress levels for everyone — and insures that the impact of the divorce on children will be more harmful than it needs to be.

Experience has taught us that while a marriage may end, the family does not. We also know that it is not the event of the divorce itself that harms a child, but rather the ***continued conflict between parents*** that can result in childhood problems such as anger, depression, poor grades, fear, alcohol and drug abuse, and delinquency. The good news is that, through cooperative efforts, parents can prevent or minimize the negative impact of divorce on their children. To the extent that you can learn to set aside your own conflicts, increase your awareness about how divorce can affect your child, and restructure your family relationships in a new and healthy way, the future for your children can be happier and more secure. It will take time and personal growth, but it's good to keep in mind that bad times have an ending as well as a beginning.


Memories
toys
The Way my Family Was
Fragile Handle with care!
Memories
"Good-bye, House!"

Divorce: A Painful Decision and A Painful Process

Currently, 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce in the United States, approximately one million per year. One or both spouses decide that their marriage is no longer fulfilling or workable — and that divorce is the best solution to their problems.

Divorce is an extremely difficult time, and most couples tend to blame each other for the problems that led to the decision to end a marriage. Often, they do and say hurtful things to each other and are unaware of the negative impact their behavior has on one another or on their children. Years after their divorce, many people have agreed that the legal aspects of their divorce were frequently easier to deal with than the emotional upheaval of the divorce and the feelings that arose from the end of the relationship.

The Divorce Process: Facing Loss. Divorcing someone you were once in love with is not an event that happens at the point when one partner moves out of the house. It is usually a process that begins much earlier. It's important for spouses, no matter how angry they are with one another, to acknowledge the *loss* that divorce brings. Whether or not an individual *wants* the divorce, there is some loss of identity — a piece of himself or herself that seems to be missing. There may also be a sense of having failed at something fairly significant. Both spouses may miss the positive regard, conversation, and shared memories they once enjoyed. After some years of marriage and togetherness, loneliness or feelings of abandonment may set in for one or both spouses. "Not wanting to run into the other spouse" may eliminate continuing to attend the same church, community functions, or other activities that were carried out as a couple. The feelings of isolation experienced by divorcing couples are heightened by the awkwardness of friends and extended family who "don't know what to say," are "afraid of taking sides," or worried that divorce is a "contagious condition."

The feelings experienced at any time in the process may be different for each spouse, and each may swing back and forth among the specific "feeling states" people usually experience when coping with loss — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. One spouse may be in **denial** about how much trouble the marriage was in and why the other spouse has gone to such extreme measures; another may have been unhappy for a long time and feel only relief and **acceptance** that the decision has

finally been made. Another partner in a couple may be at a **bargaining** stage, wanting to do *anything* to repair the situation. A spouse who feels especially fearful about the future or betrayed or disrespected in some way may experience a great deal of hostility and **anger**. Another may teeter back and forth between extreme sadness, **depression** or anxiety and glimmers of hope about a better future. When a spouse cannot successfully move toward acceptance of a partner's wish to end their relationship, and remains stuck in prolonged denial, bargaining, anger, or depression, professional counseling may be helpful or necessary for regaining equilibrium.

Effectively ending a spousal relationship but continuing to co-parent children can be highly problematic if the couple becomes mired down in rigidity and bitterness whenever they communicate with one another about their children. Some couples who divorce continue for years to get back at one another by using parenting issues to maintain a level of control over the other person. One person expressing anger about not wanting the divorce said, "Someday I am going to ruin my ex! I don't know how, but I will." Unfortunately, such bitterness only eats away at all family members' emotional and physical health over time, setting up barriers to more positive futures for everyone — parents *and* children.

Heading for Overload. The pressures experienced by people ending a marriage can be enormous. While the event of divorce can never be stress-free, many couples maintain unnecessarily high levels of stress following the event because of an inability or unwillingness to establish a new and separate existence. Until that adaptation can be made, the strain that results will begin to show itself in the decline of physical and mental health, the development of problems in other relationships and the breakdown of coping abilities. The sources of overwhelming stress can include:

- Continued hostility toward the other parent
- Dealing with the broken extended family
- Rearranging finances
- Broken social role (feeling like a 5th wheel) and lack of social acceptance
- Concern about the emotional health of children
- Child care demands and finding acceptable child care
- Children playing one parent against another

- Finding psychic energy to deal with children's demands and personal stress
- Loneliness, access to the opposite sex
- Learning new and strange roles formerly someone else's responsibility
- Time management
- Maintaining old friendships and developing new ones.

How much an individual can endure before burnout occurs will depend upon one's genetic makeup (energy level, mood, etc.); personal coping resources, such as education or income; age, number and gender of children; and the amount of outside support available during the crisis period. We can recognize that stress is out of control by paying attention to the following signals:

Health Indicators

- Increased colds and flu
- Sudden loss or gain in weight
- Sleep disorders
- Bowel problems or frequent stomach upsets
- Flare-up of physical problems such as ulcers, high blood pressure, colitis, headaches, asthma
- Constant fatigue

Behavior Indicators

- Radical mood swings
- Flare-ups of anger, irritability
- Tendency to cry easily or often
- Increased chemical consumption....tobacco, alcohol, coffee, colas, drugs
- More risk-taking behaviors and accidents
- Continual complaining, sarcasm
- Forgetfulness, lack of concentration
- Inability to make decisions

Relationship and Attitude Indicators

- Increased arguments
- Fewer friends
- Isolation from extended family members or co-workers
- More relationships on the downswing
- Increased judgmental behavior and degrading of others
- Sense of being misunderstood or unappreciated
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Inability to be enthusiastic
- Free-floating anger or anxiety
- Pessimism, cynicism

Strategies for Coping. Ex-spouses who truly want to get on with their lives have some hard work ahead of them. While it is expected that there will be numerous emotional highs and lows throughout the entire process, the manner in which individuals handle their stress at the beginning of the process may have implications for years to come. If contact between the couple remains conflicted, it will be felt over and over at such times as visitation pick-up and drop-off, subsequent custody disputes or reshuffling, remarriage of one of the spouses, the birth of children to an ex-spouse and new partner, illness or death of a child or ex-spouse, high school or college graduations, marriages of children, and birth of grandchildren. It is *never over* — unless both spouses decide to let go of their hostilities, discipline themselves to take the "high road," and get on with their lives. Parents who are emotionally strong and healthy themselves are in the best possible position to help their children cope with the change that divorce brings.

There are a number of strategies that can help divorcing parents get through the initial transition period in better *personal* shape, setting the tone for the future. These include:

- Visiting friends and family often by telephone or in person (try to focus on what's happening in *their* lives as well and find other issues to talk about besides your DIVORCE. They'll be grateful and, believe it or not, it will help lower your anxiety levels).
- Getting involved in a support group to talk about problems and solutions.

- Looking for free or inexpensive activities and entertainment.
- Getting financial counseling if necessary.
- Coping with stress through exercise, developing new interests, taking classes, getting involved in volunteer work, making new friends, getting enough rest, watching nutrition, and avoiding harmful behaviors that only tend to increase problems (if your intuition says, "There may be a problem here," there usually is!).
- Letting some household chores go or changing regular routines to adjust to new demands and reserve energy.
- Remembering obligations to your first family before starting a second family.
- Expecting that there will be times when nothing seems to be going right, but reminding yourself that things usually get better if you work actively at making them better....one step at a time.

The adjustments required in post-divorce relationships are never easy, for divorce is one of life's most stressful events for everyone involved. This will be a time when you will need to take care of yourself and treat yourself well. If events become overwhelming, ask for and get help. The ability to do so is never a sign of weakness, but instead a sign that a person is dealing with stress in a wise and productive way. It can result in your coming through the process *intact*, rather than in tatters — and, eventually, you'll look toward the future in a more hopeful way. It will also make a big difference in the way your children adjust to the divorce, restoring health to your family.


I dont want my mom and dad to get devorst!
family

What about the Children? How Do *They* Experience the Divorce?

Since sixty percent of divorces occur for people between the ages of 25 and 39, many of them have dependent children. We know that at least half of these children will grow up in families where their parents will stay angry with one another. Three out of five of the children will feel rejected by at least one of their parents, and many will spend years in single-parent situations or see their parents remarry. Since second marriages are at greater risk of ending than first marriages, many children may experience still another divorce of a parent (Neuman, 1998).

Telling Children about Separation and Divorce. Unless one spouse has abandoned the family, both parents should sit down together with all their children and explain the reasons for the divorce. They need to be honest with their children, trying to explain the reasons for the divorce in terms that children can understand. Prior to announcing the divorce to their children, parents need time to think through what their children need to hear, what will worry them the most, and (most importantly) what they *do not* need to hear. Blaming the problems on "sin" or "sickness" only further confuses children. Parents should control any emotional outbursts, since breakdown on a parent's part is terrifying to a child. When parents can share telling their children together about divorce, three things happen:

- Children tend to move through denial of the divorce more quickly.
- Parents are already modeling their ability to still cooperate as parents and "be there" for their children, especially during difficult times.
- There tends to be less focus on a "bad parent" and "good parent" perspective on the part of either the children or the parents.

Some of the important things children need to hear their parents say are:

- Though their parents' marriage has ended, the family will continue, including relationships with the extended family — on both sides. While adult feelings for one another can change, the special connection between parents and their children and the children's relationship with siblings, grandparents and other relatives goes on forever.

- Parents will continue taking care of their children and providing for them.
- Children had no part in the change of feelings between the adults. In no way did they cause that change and, though they may wish they had the power to change the decision their parents have made, they do *not* have it.
- The decision their parents have made to divorce was not a whim, but a carefully thoughout direction after a lot of effort went in to trying to make the marriage work.
- Parents regret the hurt this decision has caused for their children.
- Though the divorce will bring changes in the amount of time spent with each parent, other areas and routines in the life of the child will continue — same school, house, friends, or whatever parents can manage that will remain the same.
- Parents understand that children will have a lot of concerns and certainly a lot of feelings about the divorce, and parents are available to listen.

What children *do not need* to hear are messages that one parent is "good" and the other parent is the "bad one." This is true even if one of the spouses feels that way about the other because of an affair, use of drugs, alcohol or personality problems. Children don't need to be burdened with details of what went wrong; they just need to know what will happen to *them.*

Children's Feeling States and Reactions. Children feel hurt and helpless when parents divorce. They are emotionally attached to both parents, and most children want their parents to stay together. Like adults, they can also experience considerable loss: dramatic change in their important relationships with family members (primarily the non-custodial parent and grandparents), changes in the environment (home, neighborhood, school, church), and loss of traditions established by the intact family. Just as their parents do, they go through a grieving process.

Denial of the divorce is the child's attempt at trying to control a situation in which they have no control. They will deny the divorce to themselves, with their parents, at school, and with friends. Denial serves to defend against intolerable pain until it can be

tolerated bit by bit. They will tell others, "My dad just got a new job, and we'll be moving where he went later," or "They've had this fight before and gotten back together....so they will this time, too!"

Anger is understandable. Parents have broken an unwritten rule. They were supposed to provide stability of family life as children grew up. Children are angry about the pain. They are angry about the failure of their parents to find another solution. They are angry about the changed financial status with which they must cope. They may be angry with themselves thinking they have caused the divorce. Their anger puts them in a double-bind. They recognize their parents as particularly vulnerable right now, and it makes them feel unsafe. They are afraid their anger might push away what relationship they *do* have with the parent who is no longer living at home. This anger may come out with brothers and sisters, with neighborhood children, at school, or in self-destructive behavior.

Bargaining by children is an attempt to keep their parents from divorcing. Children will bargain with themselves, their parents, their teachers, friends, and even God. Children may offer to be "better children." They will offer to keep their rooms cleaner, do their homework, and not to fight with their brothers and sisters. All of these are hard promises to keep.

Depression may occur when children realize the divorce *is* going to happen, no matter what they do. Depression is a normal reaction and may be exhibited through withdrawal, drop in school grades, apathy, eating too much or too little, crying easily, aggression, carelessness about their appearance. Depression may last for weeks or months. A child's prolonged depression with no periods of lighter mood is a sign that parents need to seek professional help for the child. Often, prolonged depression means a child is feeling overly responsible for the divorce.

The child's **acceptance** of the divorce will be demonstrated through a renewed focus on the present and the future. The child will begin to anticipate the future and not dwell on the divorce factors. They will come to see their everyday problems as separate from their parents' divorce, rather than being caused by the divorce.


I want a devors
I do too!
I wish I hadn't heard that!

It is important for parents to keep in mind that children can and do recover from divorce, especially when they have parents who are reliable, loving, caring and supportive. Remind them, "You can count on me. I will always keep my promises to you." A custodial parent has a tough but important job to support the children's other parent. It's important to remember that though it might be very tempting to put down the other parent, it is ultimately harmful to a child. Focus on what you have control of, not what you cannot change. Find books to read with young children and books to give older children to read that include such family situations (a list of these can be found on p. 53 in this booklet). You can help your child appreciate that the "adult problem" and the other parent's absence are *not* a reflection of how lovable they are...or that they are any less important to their absent parent.

The effects of divorce vary with children's ages and depend on the circumstances surrounding the divorce. While every child is different and may react in different ways to divorce, there are some common reactions by age group that parents may see.

Babies and Toddlers. Though some parents believe that these children are too young to know what is going on, they definitely react. They are especially sensitive to changes in the people they depend on for their primary care — usually their mothers and fathers — because they haven't learned to feel separate from them and the emotions they are feeling. Confusion, anxiety and fear are the most common feelings in infants and toddlers. Some have trouble sleeping, are afraid to leave a parent, become excessively cranky, cling, cry more often, and slow down somewhat in learning new skills.

Both fathers and mothers are important in these earliest months and years of a child's life. Parents play distinctly different roles in building trust, self esteem and confidence in their child. It would be a mistake to think that these children are too young to notice one parent's absence. All children need to develop an attachment to both their mother and father, to be nurtured by both of them, to have both of them to play with (since fathers play in an entirely different way with their children), and to learn from each parent.

Young Children. Preschool children live in a small world mostly made up of parents and family. They have not had many experiences. They react to what is happening in an emotional way and cannot understand the divorce on an intellectual level. There is evidence that young children, two to five, suffer the most severe short- and long-term effects when their parents split up. They are highly susceptible to unstable daily routines and are more dependent on their mother and father as a source of nurturance and help.

Preschoolers are also intensely hampered by childhood interpretations of events. For example, because of the magical thinking characteristic of this age group, these children may make up macabre fantasies about why one parent has left or feel they are responsible in some way for the breakup. They often believe they were naughty and caused their parent to leave. Perhaps after being punished, they were angry or wished something bad would happen, and it did! Tremendous guilt feeltings can result.

Divorce is confusing, and preschool children may be afraid that they will be abandoned or have nowhere to live. Like toddlers, they cry, cling, become overly demanding or have temper trantrums. Parents may see them return to security items to resolve their emotional neediness. Lapses in toilet training and sleep problems may appear.

Again, there are other social and emotional spinoffs to the loss of the dual-parent unit for very young children. Each parent potentially provides something for a preschool child: male and female role models; the stability that is necessary for the normal separation process to occur, enabling children to move beyond the family arena; resolution of the Oedipal conflict, which is dealt with between three and six years of age; and the powerful presence of two parents to reinforce discipline codes and behavioral expectations, leading to more mature moral development.

Rules are absolute at this age and, to the child, consequences are unrelated to intentions. Therefore, "If Daddy can leave Mother because they weren't getting along very well, Mother might leave, too, unless I'm really, *really* good!" The possibility that such a

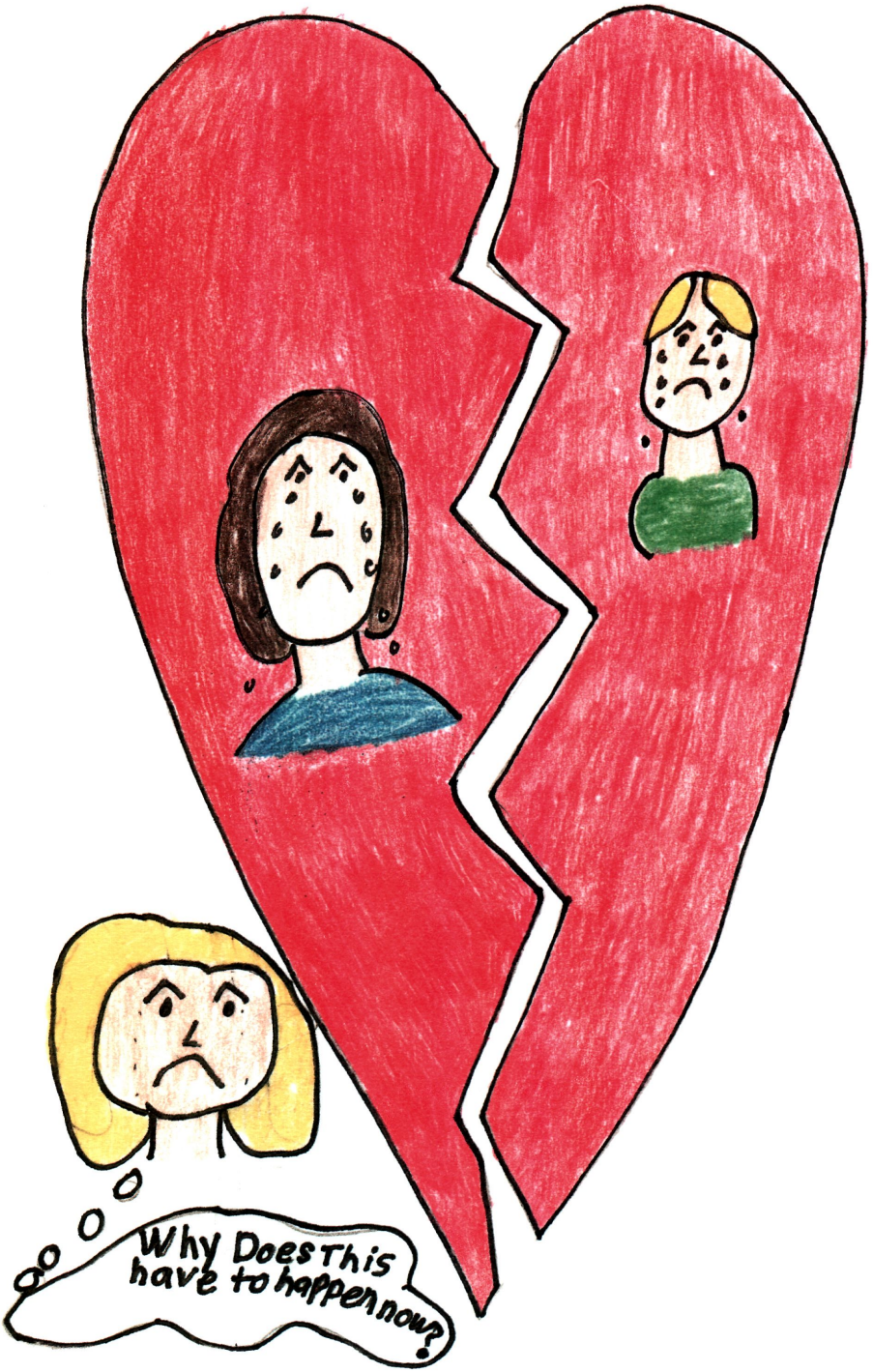
thing could happen strikes fear into the hearts of young children. Many begin "hanging around" the remaining parent, keeping a desperate eye on the situation, even getting up in the middle of the night to see if the parent is still there. They may become too eager to please in order to avoid the imagined abandonment. When this happens, children are said to become "relationship oriented." They tend to bend with the situation in favor of what they perceive another person wants, rather than developing and practicing strong internal control. Implications for later situations involving peer pressure are obvious.

Play behaviors are often negatively affected, and these children show a marked *inability* to play creatively, to verbalize out loud during their play, or become involved in free expression with art media. There is a double danger in a child's decreased interest in expressive play; in this age group, play functions as a way of expressing emotions, something these children need for discharging the tension of the crisis they are undergoing.

Defense mechanisms are commonly used by preschoolers. They often regress to some behaviors common in an earlier, more comfortable stage in their lives. Some will spend inordinate amounts of time engaged in solitary play with toys they played with earlier in their development. Thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, wetting or soiling their pants, throwing temper tantrums, and prior eating problems may reappear, adding anxiety to the burdens already being carried by parents.

Children at this age may refuse to play with other children, expressing their anger in more hitting and kicking. Understandably, they may indicate increased preference for adult companionship or comforting in favor of playing with their own age-mates.

Elementary Age Children. Profound sadness and longing to have parents reunited are characteristic of children in the middle years of childhood. They often harbor hope that they can convince their parents to reconcile-- and work hard at doing so. Crying is common. These children are also frequently angry but are "wise enough" not to confront their parents directly about the


Why Does This have to happen now?

source of their anger. There is a sense of not being able to control important events in their lives. They tend to express this anger in whining, extreme mood shifts, physical complaints, fears, and significant drops in school achievement or an *overfocus* on school achievement.

It's hard to concentrate on the 3 Rs or something the teacher is talking about when there are more important things to deal with: being ashamed of what's happening in your family — (If I play in the concert Friday, will both my mom and my dad be there? Will they fight in front of everybody?); wondering if your dad will feel you don't love him anymore if you ask to stay with your mother; agonizing over who's going to get the dog.

Even if the divorce itself took place earlier in their lives, these children deal with it all over again because of the dramatic changes that are taking place in their thinking. They are becoming somewhat more sophisticated in their ability to understand complex reality and to handle their unhappiness, feelings of loss and rejection, and the helplessness and loneliness that preoccupies them most of the time. They try hard not to think about the situation at all. Some do this by getting involved in vigorous activity. They are more able to verbalize their now-conscious, intense anger....not to their parents, necessarily, but to someone else who will listen. They tend to move toward establishing blame in one parent and intense loyalty toward the other one who is perceived as more virtuous.

Despite these newly emerging coping skills, children in the middle years still experience the pain of having their own world turned upside down, not having enough information about what is happening in their lives, and trying to construct a workable concept of what their family life is going to be like. It is a myth to believe that the pain associated with divorce is not as great as it once was, simply because so many families are divorcing. These children cannot connect to that; they only know that *their* parents are no longer going to be married to one another.

Because children in this age group must widen their world to include peer involvement, homework, and extra-curricular

activities, the necessity of having to schedule a "social time" or visitation with a non-custodial parent may be costly in terms of friendships with other children, completion of homework assignments and leisure time that is normally available on the weekends to just "mess around."

Children in the middle years are prone to misconceptions. Information they gain by eavesdropping on telephone conversations or screening the mail tends to be inaccurate. Also, they often misinterpret the importance of other adults in their parents' lives: a date or a phone call is perceived as the first step toward a stepfamily situation or the end of their fantasy of getting their parents back together.

Teenagers. There is widespread misunderstanding about the effects of divorce on adolescents. Despite their increased access to support systems outside the family — peer groups, parents of friends, school counselors, etc. — many teens are absolutely shaken up when they learn their parents are getting a divorce. According to information about the timing of divorce, parents of adolescents are the second fastest growing group of adults seeking a divorce. Marital satisfaction is frequently reported to be at an all-time low in the period where families have teenagers. Many of these parents reported that since they felt they weren't getting any younger, their marriage was at such a low point, and their children were now fairly independent, it seemed the best time to make the break if one was going to be made. While it is true that some marriages are better off dissolved, it is also true that there doesn't seem to be a "best" time to divorce, at least where children are concerned.

Teenagers often feel embarrassed and resentful toward parents who they perceive as giving their *own* needs priority at the expense of the family staying intact. Gary Neuman, a mental health counselor, notes that adolescents sometimes work hard to hide their sense of loss and grief, earning praise from others who see them as "so grown up" and "handling everything so well." These children warrant a second look, he cautions, since they can actually be *more* adversely affected than the those who act

out at the time of the divorce. By refusing to focus on the situation realistically or talk about it, they may really be defending themselves against emotions that are overwhelming. Eventually, teenagers who cannot find a positive avenue for communicating their feelings may act out in unacceptable, destructive, and self-defeating ways.

Often, when parental divorce occurs in the adolescent's life, there is a press to grow up sooner and become independent from parents. This is usually more hurried in ruptured families than in intact families. Thus, the time the teenager needs to move back and forth between independent and dependent behavior is usually diminished significantly. Also, the opportunity to use parents as sounding boards is decreased because parents are more preoccupied with their *own* needs.

Researchers Wallerstein and Kelly *(Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce)* note that other family functions crucial to maintaining adolescent development are also weakened by divorce, including providing necessary discipline and control. The result is that these youngsters are less capable of developing inner control, conscience, and an independent capacity to make judgments that they need in dealing with their peer groups. These adolescents reported that their parents' divorce "left them feeling vulnerable to their own newly strengthened sexual and aggressive impulses, and surrounded by the temptations of the adolescent world without the supports that would hold them on a straight course." Other problems in this age group, according to these researcher are:

- Divorced parents often tend to be viewed by their adolescent children as sexual beings because of their re-entry into the dating mainstream. This perception contrasts with a relative invisibility of parental sex in intact homes.
- Separated or divorced parents sometimes date people who are close in age to their own children, evoking sexual fantasies in their own children.


I'll be back in 9 weeks! Love you!
What about Me!??
Don't go see the Step Dad!

- Adolescents become anxious about their own chances for future marital success, given the failure of their parents' marriage.
- There is marked de-idealization of parents by the teen; in short, parents are viewed as fallen idols.
- There is a great deal of anger. Part of the anger expressed by these adolescents is related to their age, but the divorce gives them new excuses for venting it.
- There are intense loyalty conflicts, with both parents wanting the teenager's primary allegiance, putting the child squarely and painfully in the middle. The adolescent may seek to align with one parent and be extremely hostile toward the one they view as responsible for the breakup.
- Although many adolescents cope with the conflict and do move toward resolution, allowing them to get on with their own development, others regress toward childhood, either temporarily or for prolonged periods. Regression includes playing with younger children or spending large amounts of time alone, disrupted school performance, and increased dependency on a parent.
- There may be heavier involvement than normal with the opposite sex and sexual acting out.

What Children Need from Their Divorced Parents

Remember that your children are depending on both you and your ex-spouse to protect them as much as possible as you deal with all the ups and downs your divorce will bring. You can only shield your children if you resolve to put them first. Somehow, you need to find the strength to do that — to provide the love, guidance, and stability they need now more than ever. They will observe first-hand how adults they love can come through a series of difficult personal challenges and still emerge hopeful about the future — with their integrity and self esteem intact.

During and after the divorce process, children need as much continuity, geographic stability, and predictability as their parents can provide, according to the Center for Divorce Education. Being uprooted and moved away from their original family home causes multiple emotional, social, and activity losses, which compounds the loss of one parent for them. Parents should do their best to maintain healthy and smooth environments for children. If at all possible, they should try to work it out so that the child stays in the family home, can continue to go to the same school, and keep their same friends and routines. When children can maintain regular routines, they are less likely to be overwhelmed by the changes divorce brings.

Children also need positive relationships with both parents. A child of divorce craves attention. One of the most important things we have learned through studies of divorced families is that children who have frequent and regular contacts with both parents fare much better after divorce. They also benefit when they can continue to have contact with friends and relatives of both parents. This calls for both parents to stress the good points about the other one, to avoid name calling, or blaming the other parent for problems. The Children's Hospital Guidance Center in Columbus, Ohio, has identified a number of communication, behavioral skills, and perceptions necessary for effective and positive co-parenting after divorce:

1. Accept the idea that while your marriage is ending, you will be parents forever. The family is not ending; it is being reorganized.
2. While you no longer share together as husband and wife, you do share love and mutual concern for your children. This is the basis of your new relationship with your ex-spouse.

3. Separate the children's needs and concerns from your own. Your child does not experience your former spouse the way you do.
4. Focus on the strengths in your relationship — what you've done well together as parents — and build on those strengths.
5. Create new boundaries in the relationship with the other parent:
    - Build from the ground up. Don't assume old patterns; build new ones.
    - Clarify new expectations.
    - Remember you need to think of and behave toward your former spouse as your business partner in raising the children, rather than as your spouse.
6. Limit your communication with one another to child-related issues. Be explicit and detailed about these issues when speaking to the other parent.
7. Don't let marital issues into the discussion. If your former spouse can't keep old marital disagreements out of the conversation, suggest resuming it later.
8. Don't blame the other parent or cut him or her down in front of your child. Since children's self-esteem is strongly linked to the image they have of each of their parents, you diminish your child's self-worth every time you speak of your ex-spouse in negative terms.
9. Speak in "I messages," not "You Messages." For example, "I get upset when you don't show up on time. It disappoints our children," rather than, "You never show up on time. I've had it!"
10. Be courteous and respectful, even if you don't feel your ex-spouse deserves it (Be especially careful about sarcasm and your tone of voice).
11. Don't expect appreciation or praise from the other parent.
12. Act like a guest in the other parent's home.

Richard Victor, a lawyer participating in the Oakland County SMILE program tells the story of the child who finished a phone call with his mother who was the non-custodial parent. "I tried to tell Mom that I'm getting a


What did I do wrong? Please stop fighting about me!

Scout award next week, but she said she couldn't come because she was getting an award herself that night at work," whined the seven-year-old to his father.

The father, who felt that his ex-wife frequently put her work before the welfare of her children, was tempted to share his feelings and side in with his son's dissatisfaction. However, because he was convinced that his son needed to have as positive an attitude as possible toward his mother, the father suggested, "I know how disappointed your mom has to be. She'll feel pretty awful not to be there. I also know that she would have liked to have had you there to see *her* get her award. Lots of good things are happening all at the same time! Why don't we call up and order some flowers for her? What do you think we should put on the card?" The father said that the expense of the flowers was worth seeing his son light up, losing his own disappointment as he refocused on the surprise for his mother — a good lesson for the future.

Parents should remember that court-appointed visiting rights are usually only *minimal* for supporting continuing contact for a non-custodial parent. Seeing children only several times a year or occasionally on weekends and holidays may lead to difficulty in knowing what your children's changing interests are or what to do with them during a visitation. It's sometimes easy to spot the non-custodial parent and child at restaurants or amusement places. Parent-child interactions seems strained and somewhat unnatural because there's a getting-acquainted-all-over-again or a let's get-ready-to-break-it-off-again component in these relationships that's missing in the custodial parent-child relationship. In some cases, non-custodial parents and children lose touch altogether. This may be the result when a non-residential parent forms a new family, tires of dealing with an uncooperative ex-spouse, or begins to resent the financial responsibilities attached to continuing the relationship. No matter what the reason is, it's terribly damaging to a child. Joe DiMaggio, Jr. remembered his own painful experience in a 1982 interview with Larry King:

> I never knew my father. My parents were divorced when I was little and I was sent away to private school, and my father was totally missing from my childhood. When they needed a picture of father and son, I'd get picked up in a limo and have my picture taken. We were on the cover of


I Feel Like I'm disappearing

> the first issue of *Sport* magazine when it came out in 1949, my father and I, me wearing a little No. 5 jersey. I was taken to the photo session, we had the picture taken, and I was driven back. My father and I didn't say two words.
>
> I cursed the name Joe DiMaggio, Jr. At Yale, I played football....I deliberately avoided baseball....(When) I ran out on the field and they announced my name, you could hear the crowd murmur. When I decided to leave college and join the Marines, I called my father to tell him. So I told him, and he said, "The Marines are a good thing," and there was nothing more for us to say to each other.

When the non-custodial parent and child are able to spend time together, every effort should be made to have that time adequately balanced between structured, more intense activity and non-structured, laid-back freedom. Instead of a restaurant meal, it might be a better idea to go grocery shopping together and cook the meal at home, even if cooking abilities are low-level. Instead of constantly being on the go, parent and child might want to spend a more relaxing evening playing a game both enjoy or just watching a favorite TV program together — unless the parent uses television as a cop-out for talking and interaction with the child.

In best-case situations where ex-spouses have agreed to focus as positively as possible on their co-parenting, the non-custodial parent continues to live in the same neighborhood so that children have optimal access to both their parents and are free to come and go in either household. Gary Neuman (1998:49-50), author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce*, has written a book filled with good information for divorcing parents. He lists a number of important ways for both parents to help their children recover from their loss, including the following:

- Never assume your children know how much they mean to you. Hug them, touch them as you speak to them, looking them straight in the eye and saying, "I love you."
- Spend quality time and quantity time. Kids need both. One of the most important messages you can send your child is, "I value you enough to choose to spend time with you as opposed to spending it with other people or doing other things." Accept that there may never be the "perfect" moment, and make the best of

the five-, ten-, or fifteen-minute "chances" you get as they come. Don't put your child off throughout the day thinking you're getting other obligations out of the way so you can devote two hours to the ball game or the big dinner out. Children need consistent, continuous contact.

- Maintain structure. Children crave structure, routine, and limits. A predictable, structured home makes your child feel safe, secure, and loved.

- Stay involved in your children's life. Show an interest in their day; get to know their friends; find out what's going on at school, whether or not you're the residential parent.

- Attend school and extracurricular events. Children of divorce often comment on how sad they feel when only one parent attends a school play, even if only one attended before the divorce. If your children are interested, invite them to share in your hobbies, learn more about theirs, or find something new that you can take up together, like cooking, tennis, or collecting comic books.

- Find and focus on your children's wonderful qualities. It's not enough just to love your child; learn to fall in love again, not with the babies they were the first time you laid eyes on them but with the persons they are today. Point out their good behavior and qualities, and be specific. Don't simply say, "You're a good person." Instead, tell them, "That was a very thoughtful thing you did for your friend (mother, brother, sister....)," or "You should be very proud of this test score. You organized your evenings so you could give the material your full attention and you really mastered it. Congratulations!"

- Allow your children to express themselves freely. Listen and focus on their words and feelings without judging, advising, or teaching. Earn their trust by keeping whatever they tell you confidential, if they request. Never use anything your children share with you against them, your ex-spouse, or anyone else.

- Encourage your children's individuality and social development. Support your children's participation in activities that enhance their sense of personal accomplishment (learning to play a musical instrument, collecting, hobbies) and those that give them a sense of belonging (sports, group dance, scouting, volunteer work).

Tips to help non-custodial parents and their children maintain closer relationships and communication include:

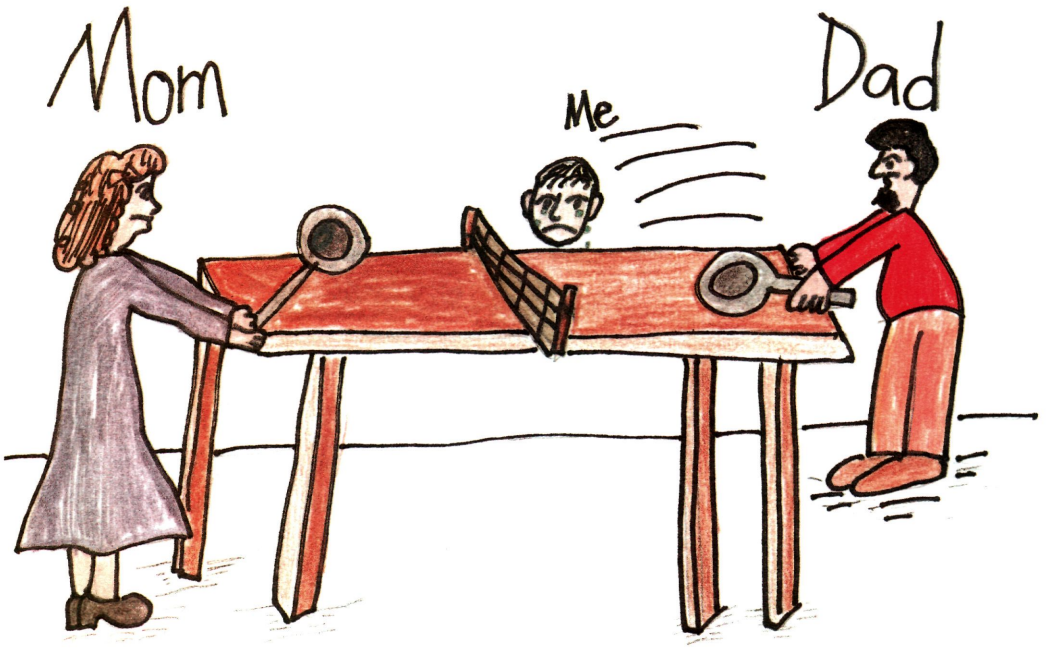
- Write letters regularly....weekly or even more often. You may want to use stationery that is distinctive, either in color or design, so that your children will recognize it immediately. Tell them about your work and little daily happenings in your life to help provide a basis for future discussions and feel they know you better.
- Play a game via internet....something like tic-tac-toe for younger children and checkers, chess, or a board game for older children.
- Send jokes, cartoons, or pictures that you think they may enjoy.
- Have telephone conversations with your children. They are worth the cost of the calls. Phone calls allow you and your children to talk over special moments and problems. Hearing each other's voices adds a special dimension to your relationship. Short calls at frequent intervals can be better than long calls spaced at long intervals.
- Provide your children with an inexpensive cassette tape player-recorder; then, you can tape and send messages back and forth. Cassette tapes can allow you to talk about something more at length than you could perhaps afford to do on the phone. Your messages could include such things as reading or telling them a story or teaching them a new song or poem. This could work both ways, with their telling you a favorite story or joke, singing a song, reciting a poem, or taping how they're coming along on musical instrument lessons.
- Provide your children with an inexpensive instant camera to take pictures of activities and special moments to share via the mail. Video cameras are more expensive but provide an even more personal experience. If your children are too young to operate a camera, perhaps the custodial parent could take the pictures for them. You, in turn, be sure to send them pictures of yourself. A photo album they could keep their pictures in would be a good gift idea. You can carry along an instant camera on outings with

I hate having to go back and forth between my parents.

your child and ask someone to take a picture of you together so that the child can include those memories of special times together in the album.

Maternal and paternal grandparents can provide valuable emotional support and continuity to a child in the face of family dissolution. Growing numbers of grandparents even provide temporary homes for children or occasional child care. Other grandparents simply lose all contact with their grandchildren. The loss of interest and contact appears to be closely related to whether or not paternal or maternal custody is gained. Grandparents whose own children gain custody are inclined to remain supportive and in contact. Occasionally, despite a grandparent's wish to remain supportive, a spouse may view an ex-spouse's parents as a threat. The feeling may be that grandparents will undermine a parent's authority or communicate a biased picture of the breakup to the child. As a result, grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren are often shut off abruptly. This significantly decreases a child's available resources during the crisis and adds to every generations' distress.

Children need adequate financial support and care as they are growing up, and both parents need to contribute to this responsibly and fairly. When a non-custodial parent's attitude toward loss of custody remains one of intense disappointment or anger, or the parent was unstable or a poor parent to begin with, it becomes easier to dump all of their parenting responsibility into the lap of the custodial parent (You've got 'em — Now you take care of them!), including financial responsibility and total child care. The result can be severe stress overload in the custodial parent due to overwhelming economic and psychological responsibility and a marked decline in any leisure time. It also results in burnout in the custodial parent, not a good condition for rearing healthy children. The most unfortunate outcome is that children eventually perceive the inequity all by themselves. They sense the other parent's lack of support, and the result is usually a diminished respect for that parent.



I feel like a ping pong ball going back and forth

Arranging Custody

Besides reorganizing their own personal lives, the greatest task faced by divorced parents with dependent children is deciding custody arrangements. Until 1839, there was no question about custody in this country. Children were considered property and were automatically awarded to their fathers in the very rare event of divorce. In the latter part of the 19th century, however, what has come to be known as the "Tender Years Doctrine" emerged. Because of the rising influence of psychologists and child development experts, mothers were more frequently awarded custody of dependent children. Today, that arrangement is still the most often selected one, though more states are allowing joint custody.

For joint custody to be effective, the parents must be able to cooperate and communicate regarding the best interests of the children. There are two types of joint custody:

- Joint Legal Custody. This means that parents will communicate and cooperate with one another and attempt to reach mutual decisions regarding major issues affecting their children. This decision-making process includes, but is not limited to: major medical decision, educational decisions, and religious upbringing, if any. Seventy-five to 80 percent of cases involve joint legal custody today.
- Joint Physical Custody. In these cases, children live with one parent part of the time and the other parent part of the time. This time does not have to be equal. The parent who has care of the children at any given time is responsible for routine decisions regarding the children. Almost 50 percent of cases involve joint legal and physical custody. Either the child rotates in and out of each parent's home or, in the case of what is informally called "*Birdnest Custody*," the child stays in one residence, and the parents rotate in and out of the home.

Approximately 15 percent of divorced fathers now have *sole custody* of their children, and another 8 percent share *full joint physical custody*. Other arrangements made include *sole custody (with visitation)*, where the custodial parent alone is in charge of making decisions about a child. Occasionally, the court will deny visitation because it is believed that the child is

not safe with the parent, that the parent is unable to care for the child, or that the parent is likely to say or do things that will negatively affect the child. In other cases where the non-residential parent is not considered responsible enough to have the child by himself or herself, a judge will decide on *sole custody with supervised visitation.*

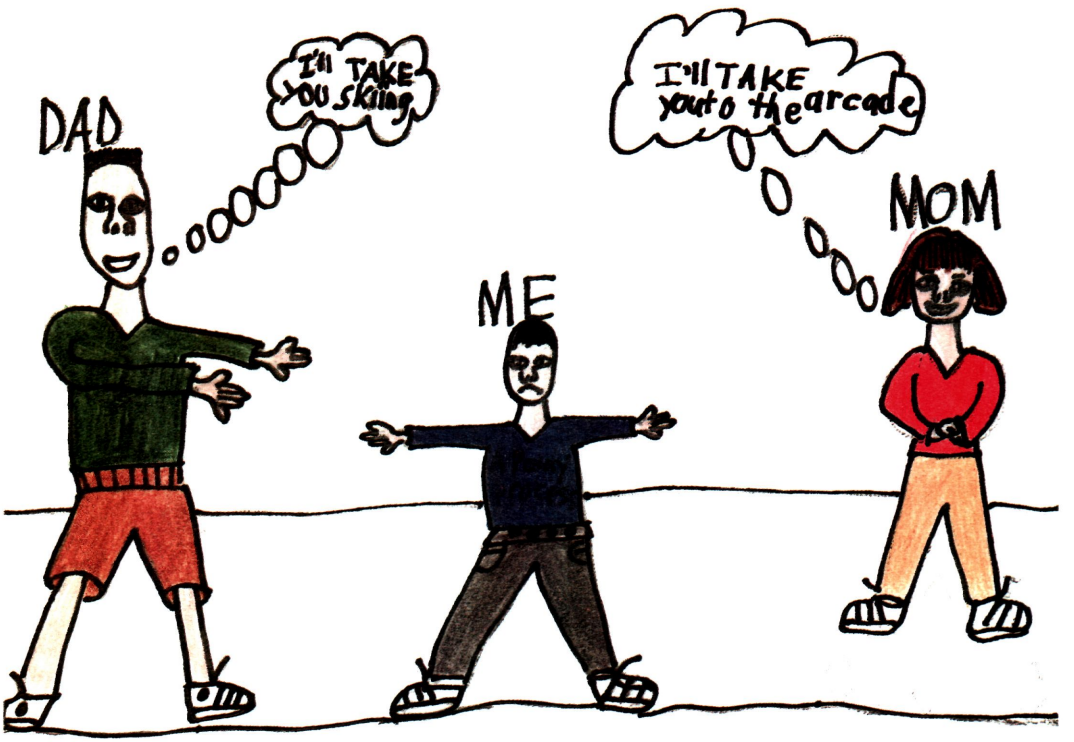
Since children form bonds with both parents, the question needs to be asked in each individual case, "Who has been the *primary psychological* caretaker of this child and to what degree has each parent emotionally invested in the welfare of the child to date?"

Child support is usually awarded to the custodial parent to help with the expenses in rearing the child. In most states, the non-custodial parent will pay 20 percent of his or her income (depending upon ability to pay) for the first child and 10 percent more for each additional child, up to as high as 50 percent of total income. However, only about half of the women who are awarded child support actually receive it. A primary reason for non-payment is out-and-out refusal to do so. Often, a non-custodial parent begins to "feel like a wallet rather than a parent." Payments are made grudgingly, particularly when the relationship with the children has been significantly stymied. Other reasons include a remarriage of the non-custodial parent to someone who resents income being paid to the former family; inability to locate a delinquent spouse; or financial difficulties of the non-custodial parent. Legislation in some states now authorizes the Friend of the Court to call for payroll deductions in the amount owed, and states are more aggressively attacking the problem of non-support because of welfare reform.

Often, the first court decision made with respect to custody is not the last. As children grow, they or their parents may have different needs. Also, one spouse may be highly dissatisfied with the original decision, feel cheated, or may use the situation later to exercise control over an ex-spouse. Some couples bounce in and out of court, spending a great deal of their emotional and financial resources over continued custody disputes to maintain (or alter), at all costs, the initial decision. Often, there is an effort on the part of one or both of these spouses to exploit or manipulate one another, even after legal dissolution of their marriage.

There are cases, however, where it would be truly beneficial to re-evaluate a prior custody decision because of changing needs of various fam-

ily members. Perhaps the custodial parent simply needs a rest from parenting responsibility or needs to put more energy into a career than earlier. Children grow older and may find one parent more satisfactory in fulfilling their needs at a particular time. For example, when children become adolescents and are struggling to organize their own identities, it is helpful for them to be with their same-sex parent. Also, unless a child's safety is involved because a parent has been found to be unfit or irresponsible, children can only get to know their parents intimately when they live with that parent on a daily basis, watching attitudes, values, and coping skills being put into practice. For these reasons, custodial parents need to be considerate of the child's developing needs in periodically reassessing whether or not they are providing the best possible environment for their children.


DAD
I'll TAKE you skiing
ME
I'll TAKE you to the arcade
MOM

Parenting Pitfalls: Dangerous Post-Divorce Quagmires

Following divorce, family members must develop new ways of relating to one another. Sometimes, unresolved hostility and resentment cause parents and children to develop certain negative behavior patterns to control one another or to retaliate for real or imagined wrongs. These "games" that are played are sometimes purposeful; more often, however, family members are not fully aware that they are operating. They are usually only aware that, for some reason, they become terribly frustrated when trying to interact with one another.

Game-playing always spells trouble. Someone once said that none of us is above playing games before marriage, during marriage, or after divorce. Though anger is usually prominent in most of these situations, a careful look *behind* a person's anger generally reveals more *basic* feelings - feelings of guilt, loneliness, rejection, humiliation, feelings of being uncared for or unappreciated, an emotional attachment to an ex-spouse, or feelings of being used, exploited, or manipulated. Power and control are often a central issue, and the "games" can be either child-initiated or adult-initiated. Parents can be on the alert for these, calmly bring them to the attention of the other person, avoid becoming involved in them, and curtail any that have already been established. A few of these include the following:

Loyalty Binds: Putting Children in the Middle. Children should be kept out of the middle of parents' conflicts. It's important to remember that your children do not feel the same way you do about the situation. Children's issues are not anywhere near the same as their parents' issues during and after a divorce.

In this situation, parents pull at, stretch, and tear apart their children's loyalties, each parent wanting to be loved best and respected more. Parents should never expect or encourage their children to take sides. They should allow children to express their love for the other parent and talk freely and openly about their experiences with the other parent. If a child complains about one parent, the other parent should encourage the child to take the complaint to the person responsible, rather than siding in with the child. Children can be coached to let their parents know when they feel

caught in the middle of a situation or are being asked to "tattle" on another parent.

A spinoff of this particular game take place when an ex-spouse cuts down another or communicates fault or blame by way of verbal or non-verbal messages: "I wouldn't say anything to your mother about that. You know what she's like when she doesn't get her way" or "You know your dad *never* follows through, so keep that in mind when you're making plans." These examples of communication convey negative messages that are damaging, particularly to a child who identifies closely with the spouse being put down.

Differing expectations on the part of parents in order to become the favored parent cause the child to have to shift gears continually in moving from one parent to another....and also result in a child learning to manipulate and possibly exploit parents. Expectations of behavior, the child's responsibilities, discipline strategies, and financial outlay (Disneyland Daddy or Mama) ideally should be reasonably similar from situation to situation. Non-custodial parents need to watch for the easy trap of trying to insure a child's love by being highly entertaining, buying numerous or expensive gifts, and sanctioning or ignoring a child's irresponsible behavior. When this happens, children gain unrealistic and unhealthy perspectives of what life with the non-custodial parent would be like and may begin to play one parent off against another in a form of emotional blackmail. The child may also request a change of custody in order to take advantage of what seems to be a more highly satisfactory living arrangement. In cases where parents have agreed that a particular arrangement is in the best interest of the child, a custodial parent being challenged by a child should *never* respond, "O.K. Go ahead....I'll help you pack!" This puts the child in the driver's seat and results in a power imbalance that's not healthy. Instead, the parent should remain as calm as possible and tell the child, "That behavior won't be tolerated. We both love you but have agreed that you are going to live with me. Moving is not an option."

Parentifying Children. Children need to be children. "Parentification" of a child happens when the parent and child roles are reversed, causing children to feel responsible for the well-being of one or both of their parents. A parent should never expect a child to take the place of the absent parent or depend on a child for emotional support. Such behaviors as telling children tales about the other parent's behavior and drawing them in as a confidante, letting a daughter slip into taking total charge of the housekeeping or children (often, to the dislike of their siblings) or telling a son that he is now "the man of the house" are harmful and destructive to the child's normal development. A daughter may bear her domestic "responsibilities" at the expense of school performance, normal peer involvement, or movement toward premature adult independence. She may come to expect adult privileges that are inappropriate for her but ordinarily parallel with such "grownup" responsibilities. A son may act out behaviorally when his mother tries to establish a relationship with a new partner, feeling an inappropriate need to protect his mother or his own closeness with her against the "intruder."

Using Children as Messengers and Pawns. Parents may also use children as messengers to carry information, including angry messages, back and forth because of an inability to communicate directly with one another. When parents have issues with one another, they should talk directly to each other about them. If talking is not possible, they should communicate in writing. A more damaging sidelight is using children to play "I Spy." This occurs when parents ask children to report on the ex-spouse's activity, dating relationships, or financial status. They should not pump a child for information about what goes on in the other parent's home or how the other parent is spending money. This is a violation of a child's trust. A related problem is when parents use children as collateral, withholding them from the other parent who has failed to pay child support. Children should not be used as weapons to get back at the other parent or to control the other parent.

I finaily had a good step-mother and then she broke my dad's heart.

Common Questions Parents Ask

How do you enforce drop-off and pick-up times? Rebuilding trust is going to be essential if parents are to work together on behalf of their children. According to Florence Bienfield, author of *Helping Your Child through Divorce*, doing so helps parents "create the conflict-free zone in which children can thrive. When agreements are not kept, anger, disappointment, hostility, resentment, grudges, and retaliation follow." One thing that we must remember is that we can never control another person. That person must *want* to be cooperative and keep things running smoothly for the sake of his or her children. The best way to ensure that is not to "enforce," but to treat the other person with respect at all times, not being overly critical, acting responsibly yourself, and being as flexible as possible so that "molehills do not become mountains." For example, a divorced male complained, "I know that divorce is hard on kids, but now I have even fewer regrets (about getting the divorce). My ex-wife is a slave to the divorce papers. She won't even let me bring the kids home 15 minutes late. Somehow, there has to be a way to build more flexibility into those rules." Courts cannot mandate that parents be civil toward one another or cooperative. However, when parents cannot resolve hostility, and use it to irritate an ex-spouse whenever they have contact with one another, they and their children will continue to suffer. Choosing to remain unhappy in order to get back at another person is unhealthy and is predictable of poor adjustment for children as well.

How do you help kids control their anger and emotions? While parents must acknowledge children's negative emotions, they must also forbid destructive behavior. For example, they need to tell a child, "It's all right to be angry. It is *not* okay to hit or call people names." Often, just having parents acknowledge out loud that they recognize how angry the child is can go a long way toward satisfying the child's emotional needs. The child may feel they no longer have to hit someone in order to get his or her parents' attention. To help children control their anger and emotions, keep in mind the following principles (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren and Soderman, 1999:119):

1. Children's emotions are real and legitimate to them.
2. There are no right or wrong emotions. All feelings stem from core emotions, which occur naturally.
3. Children cannot help how they feel; nor can they simply change their emotions on command.
4. All emotions serve useful functions in children's lives.

When children are having a tough time coping with their anger or grief, adults sometimes make the mistake of trying to diffuse children's

I have bad dreams about both my parents leaving me.

emotions too quickly ("Don't be a baby." "Snap out of it."). Some adults coerce children to talk about their emotions when they aren't ready to or simply don't want to. They may want to say, "Sometimes people feel better when they talk about their feelings. If you want to talk, I'll be around." We have to say that to them and tell them that we know how much it hurts them to not be living with both parents. A big mistake is to tell them, "It'll be the same....You'll see..." when it won't be. But we *can* say that hurtful things aren't quite as hurtful eventually, and that we will be there to comfort them as much as possible.

When children are acting out in disrespectful ways, try to determine what they *really* want. For example, "You want to live with your dad, so you're refusing to cooperate with me. Not doing your chores on time is not acceptable (here, a change in tone of voice is indicated) and won't be tolerated! I'm here to help you. We need to talk more about what *really* has you so upset."

Besides reminding children about what is *not okay to do* (being uncooperative, yelling, hitting, swearing, or breaking things), work to help them:

- sort out mixed emotions ("You're telling me everything is fine, but you *look* miserable.")
- enlarge their perception of an emotional event by giving them additional needed facts or information ("You thought Dad didn't want to see you this weekend, but I asked if we could trade weekends because of our family picnic.")
- learn to use self-talk ("I miss my mom, but just because I can't live with her doesn't mean she doesn't love me or has forgotten about me." "I can stay calm; I don't have to hit or yell." "I can breathe in and out very slowly to help myself stay calm." "I'm sad (scared, mad, lonely), but I can handle this.")
- think of new strategies or learn new skills as a way to deal with difficult emotions (counting to 10; telling someone how they feel; writing an imaginary or real letter about the situation; drawing a picture about how they feel)

One thing parents must examine when their children remain angry and tremendously sad about the divorce is how they are behaving toward each other. If they continue to argue and fight in front of their children, they heighten their children's sense of insecurity and also their anger. On an episode of TV's *Touched by an Angel* that focused on divorce, Della Reese says to two parents continually sparring with one another, "You're tearing your child apart. Every time you fight, he feels more and more alone, more filled with anger and rage, which will eventually come out in a terrible way.

One day, you will look at that and ask how this sweet child ever became a bitter, angry person. The truth is, he is growing up with two of them." Solid research backs up her claim.

How long does it usually take for all the hostility to die down? A lot will depend on how angry both spouses are with one another to begin with. Because of all the changes that take place, it usually takes at least a couple of years on average, with the lowest point being about a year afterwards. People who have studied the transition feel that there are actually *three* stages that people experience after a divorce. The first one, which lasts anywhere from a few months to two years and is the most painful, carries with it a lot of insecurity about what the future is going to be like. As the break-up "settles down," and both parents reorganize their lives, people go through what is known as a transitional period. Finally, in the third stage, both parents and children begin to adjust to the situation and feel a great deal more stable. Many have formed new relationships, and visitation and custody matters have usually been worked out to everyone's satisfaction. Again, gaining a renewed sense of stability depends on both parents having that as a goal and not sabotaging one another's efforts to achieve it.

What's the process for determining child support and for getting an increase in child support? Michigan law requires that the Friend of the Court or prosecuting attorneys use the child support formula when recommending child support amounts. Judges also use this formula when ordering payment amounts. The Friend of the Court's recommendation and the judge's determination can only vary from the formula when there is a clear reason to do so. Either in writing or on the court record, they must state why use of the formula would be "unjust or inappropriate." In Michigan, the child support formula considers both parents' incomes when establishing or changing support.

The Friend of the Court then reviews child support orders once every 24 months. This review is automatic in public assistance cases. In non-public assistance cases, it takes place upon written request. A "minimum threshold" establishes when a child support order should be changed. This threshold is the lesser of 10 percent or $5.00 per week. For example, if a parent is receiving $100 dollars a week and proposes that it would be fairer to receive $110 per week, the Friend of the Court will petition the court for a change. If the difference between the current amount and the proposed amount is *less* than the minimum threshold, the Friend of the Court is not required to petition for a change. The Friend of the Court, or either party, may still file a petition for a change in the support order, even if the minimum threshold is not met.


Stop fighting! I can't take it anymore!

What about custodial parents who move away or non-custodial parents who move away? Increasing the distance between either parent and child is *not* a good decision and should be avoided at all costs. As has already been said, children need frequent access to both of their parents. All evidence weighs against custodial parents taking children long distances from non-custodial parents, decreasing the parent's access to his or her children. That kind of decision is never a *fair* decision, and unless there are safety reasons, there is nothing that indicates that both parents should have any *less* right or *greater* right to participate in the rearing of their children. Children can experience greater continuity and support when both parents remain committed to rearing them and providing financially for them. A non-custodial parent who wants to maintain an attachment to his or her children has the right to contest a custodial parent's move out of state and should do so in court. Custodial parents who wish to move out of state to pursue employment opportunities or other relationships are making personal choices that are not in the best interest of their children; it is *they* who should suffer the consequences of less access to their children and not the parent who wishes to remain close in proximity. Non-custodial parents who move far distances from their children with the belief that they can make up for it by summer visits should know that their choice is a poor one, particularly as children get older and do not want to leave their own friends, activities, and neighborhood. The best thing that parents can do for their children is to make whatever sacrifices necessary to stay close to them and as involved as possible in their everyday lives.

Is it ever a good idea to split up brothers and sisters? No. They deserve to grow up knowing one another and should never be treated as property to "divvy up" after a divorce. Brothers and sisters can provide a great deal of support to one another during and following their parents' divorce. They know full well how it feels to be a child of divorce, something that parents can imagine but never quite know. Splitting siblings up would only serve to further fracture the family and should not be considered an option. When children are adolescents, however, it may be that *they* request a change of custody. If there are substantial reasons why that should be done, it may be that siblings may be split up at that time. However, in most cases, despite the fact that a lot of quarreling may go on between children, they are still one another's best friends when one truly needs a friend. They need to have daily access to one another.

What can you do about one partner who continually undermines the other parent? When parents continue to have extreme and vengeful feelings of hostility toward an ex-spouse and don't have enough integrity to

control them, they can be extremely malicious in trying to destroy a child's relationship with an ex-spouse. Richard Gardner, author of *The Parents' Book about Divorce* describes this type of parent and has labeled the syndrome as Parental Alienation Syndrome (P.A.S.) or Divorce Related Malicious Mother Syndrome (D.R.M.M.S.). Mothers are involved more often than fathers, though both parents can fall prey to "getting even."

It's easy to spot such people. They make unjustified and exaggerated criticisms of the other parent and work actively (or at an unconscious level) to brainwash their children and alienate them against the other parent. Parents involved in this often find themselves in court again and again because of visitation violations, restricting telephone calls, and keeping the other parent in the dark about the child's school functions. Unfortunately, they are sometimes successful in teaching the child to hate the other parent and to refuse contact with the parent.

What can be done about this? A parent can point out discrepancies that are clear to the child but should not try to retaliate, since it only increases the other parent's fury. Nor should the parent become involved in criticizing the other parent, since it only increases the child's sense of insecurity and sets another poor example. As much as possible, the labeled parent should answer honestly any questions their children have and continue to see their children on a regular basis. They need to center on their children's needs and the time they have together, rather than trying to disprove the other parent's unfair criticisms. Trying to fight such claims legally only keeps the ex-spouses in court, which is expensive and often not very satisfying — but exactly what the other parent wants.

How do you insure that the other spouse will stay involved with the kids? The more access a parent has to a child — without hassles from the custodial parent — the more likely that parent is to stay involved in the child's life. To insure that non-residential parents stay involved, they must be allowed to spend as much time together with the child as possible. Keep them informed about the child's friends, school activities, needs and interests. Make sure the child acknowledges the non-custodial parent's birthday and shares holiday celebrations with him or her. Remain connected with the non-custodial parent's family, allowing children to visit with grandparents, cousins, and other relatives. Allow your child to talk freely about the other parent and be sure the child has pictures of the other parent in his or her room. Put into practice some of the suggestions that were provided in this booklet for helping children keep in touch with the non-custodial parent.

If a parent does abandon a child or is there are only sporadic visits or letters, be careful about being critical. Remember that children fare better if

they have a good opinion of both their parents. However, you should acknowledge the child's disappointment when it is expressed. You can tell the child, "Sometimes when people find things too hurtful, they just avoid it. Sometimes adults become involved in their own problems.... and that might be what's happening with your (mother, dad)." You will also need to assure your child that you will always be there, no matter what. Watch for signals that your child is not handling the issue very well because one conversation about this probably is not going to be sufficient.

What about when rules are different from home to home? This happens frequently and is to be expected. Rules don't have to be the same in both households and usually are not. Children are great adapters, when they know what is expected of them. Just be very clear about the ground rules and restrictions in your home relative to chores, bedtimes, manners, and other issues. Try to get the other parent to be cooperative about discipline and major limitations (ex. homework has to be done; bedtime on a school night should be the same in both households; the child's commitment to extracurricular responsibilities, such as Scout troop meetings and piano lessons, should be honored). Don't get into a discussion about the differences with your children. Remember that they can play games, too. Simply let them know that they have certain boundaries in *your* home that may differ from the other parent's home. Tell them you expect them to follow through without challenging you about them.

At what age does the court ask children's opinions about custody? There really is no specific rule about how old children need to be. The court will often interview children in chambers and determine what weight to give their testimony.

What about the Friend of the Court? Why do they call it "Friend"...I don't see it that way. How much power do they have over my family anyway? One thing that parents must remember is that the Friend of the Court is designed to support the *court.* Its purpose is to make sure that the court's decisions relative to custody, visitation, and child support payments are carried out. Thus, it is easy to see that the parent who needs help in getting an ex-spouse to obey the court's mandates may perceive the Friend of the Court as supportive; another who is *avoiding* carrying out the court's mandates may feel that the Friend of the Court is intrusive and punitive. Actually, the office is there to protect your *child's* best interest. Friend of the Court offices have the following responsibilities:

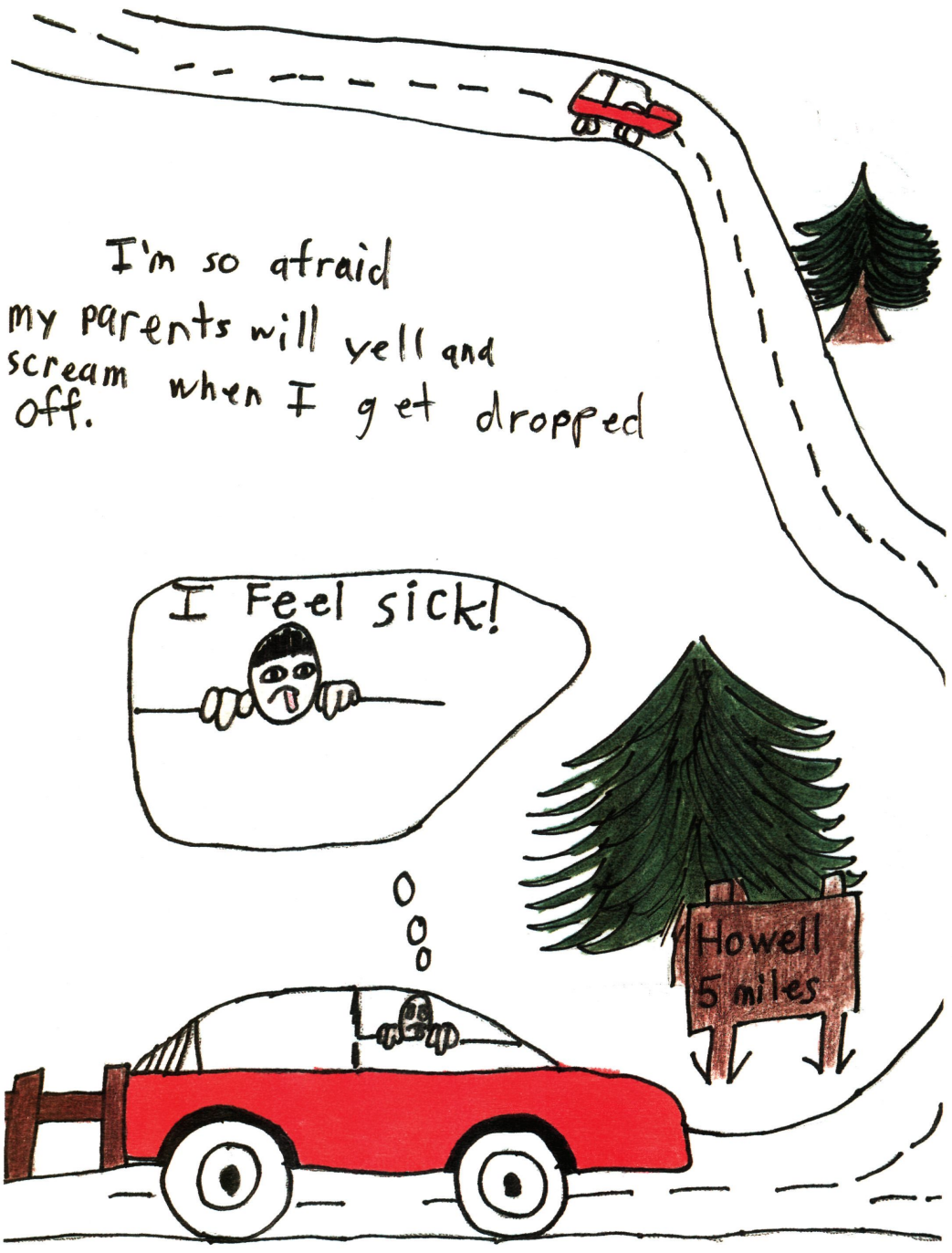
- To conduct investigations when parents cannot agree about matters related to custody, parenting time (including transportation),

or amount of child support (including medical support or, occasionally, spousal support). These investigations may be directed by the judge.

- To make reports and recommendations to the court about their findings
- To offer mediation, when both parents agree to participate, as an optional way of settling disagreements over custody or parenting time of children
- To collect, record, and send out all support payments as ordered by the court.
- To provide enforcement services on all custody, parenting time, and support orders entered by the court.

What if one parent doesn't comply with child custody payments? The Friend of the Court is required to begin enforcement action when past due support reaches an amount equal to one month of support. This may be done without waiting for a complaint or request for enforcement. The Friend of the Court has many options available to collect support. The include:

- Immediate Income Withholding. Support orders entered or changed after December 31, 1990, must include a provision for immediate income withholding.
- Contempt of Court (Show Cause) Hearing. If support is not paid on time, the Friend of the Court or a party may begin a contempt action (known a a "show cause" hearing), by filing papers requiring the payer to appear in court. If the court finds the payer in contempt, the court may require a payment toward child support of commit the payer to jail. If it appears to the court that the payer may be confined to jail, the court is required to appoint an attorney for payers who cannot afford private counsel.
- Income Tax Intercept. If support is overdue, the friend of the Court must request an income tax intercept for cases that qualify under the Federal IV-D program.
- License Suspension. For payers with an average of three or more months of support, the Friend of the Court may initiate action to have occupational, sporting, or drivers' licenses suspended.
- Consumer Reporting. In a format acceptable to the Family Independence Agency and the consumer reporting agency, the Friend of the Court must report to a consumer reporting agency the arrearage amount for each payer with two or more months of support arrearage.
- Liens. A lien is a claim against real or personal property. Once a


I'm so afraid my parents will yell and scream when I get dropped off.
I Feel sick!
Howell 5 miles

person holding property is informed of the lien, the person must not allow the property to be transferred until the lien is released.

- Cash Bonds. A cash bond is a payment of a specific amount of money to guarantee future support payments will be made. In some cases where there has been a pattern of non-payment and the payer has a large asset, the Friend of the Court may be able to obtain a cash bond.

When is it okay to date and bring a potential partner home? Be careful about jumping too quickly into the dating scene, since it will take your focus away from what your children need during the first couple of years after divorce and also from your own healing. When you feel you are ready, prepare your children by saying you would enjoy having a friend your own age to talk with, just as they do. For a period of time, see the person away from your home until you believe that your relationship is significant enough to warrant introducing the person to your children.

Gary Neuman, author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce*, advocates choosing a time when children won't be tired and having them meet the person for no longer than an hour or so at a quiet place such as a museum, park, ice-cream parlor or playground. Don't try too hard to "have things go perfectly" and don't pressure your children afterwards to tell you whether or not they "like" the person. When your significant other begins visiting in your home, set clear guidelines about his or her involvement with your children and limit that involvement so that your children don't perceive the person is trying to take the place of the non-custodial parent. Watch displays of affection that highlight the sexual nature of your relationship....and don't have the person spend the night when your children are at home. Should your child indicate a definite dislike for the person, try to discuss the reasons for that discomfort but, unless there are safety issues (abuse, teasing, inappropriate touching, etc.), make it very clear that you will expect the child to treat the person with respect — and make sure they do so.

Conclusions

Children *can* learn to be happy again after their parents' divorce. This depends on how seriously their parents take their co-parenting responsibilities afterwards and whether or not they can put aside their own differences for their children's sake. This calls for cooperation and compromise by both ex-spouses, active stress management by parents, and a commitment by both to restructure the family into a new, healthy, and well-functioning unit. We're hopeful that this booklet has provided the information and support you need to move in that direction. We wish you success along the way as you build a co-parenting relationship that is based on integrity — one that will always be in the best interest of your children.

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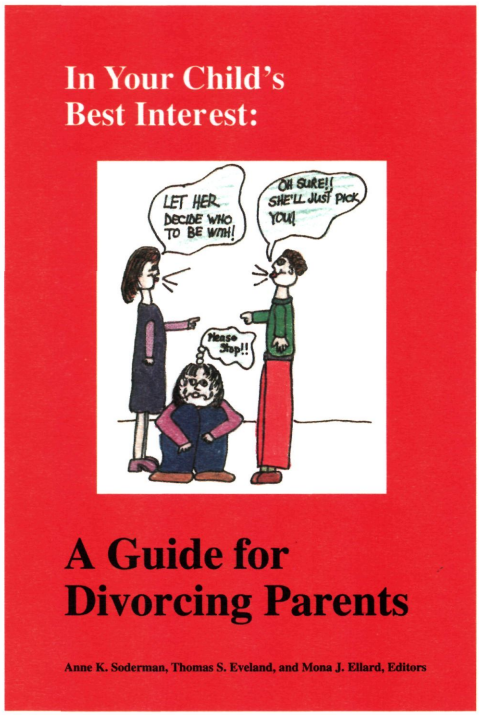

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