



# Divorce Doesn't Always Equate to "Devastation"

## The American Stereotype

Although statistics have revealed for years that half of all marriages will end in divorce, "many Americans believe in the typical stereotypes relating to home, marriage, family and spouse" (Yale, 2009). Our society has created a set plan by which we "will date, fall in love, marry, set up a home, bear and raise children, work, and live happily ever after" (Yale, 2009). When *the plan* does not work, "failure is felt by everyone in the family" (Yale, 2009).

Separation, divorce and the typical arguments leading to this end result in many unsolved issues, needs and problems. Adults would like to believe children are naïve to the adult issues sur-

rounding them but generally children know when their environment is emotionally unstable. Children are often treated with a double standard. We refuse to provide explanations though the questions are obvious and the distress apparent. Expecting mature reactions while not treating them as such is unrealistic.

Children often live with insecurities, blame and uncertainty as they do not express their concerns and feelings for fear of upsetting either parent more than they already are.

"Children can gain and grow emotionally by seeing the significant adults in their life work through



*"Children need an environment where they can express their concerns and feelings about what is happening to their families and to them."*  
(Yale, 2009)

and solve the problems created by a divorce situation" (Yale, 2009). When your child views the glass as half-full, he understands that "much can be salvaged from what seems to be a total failure, and people can work with problems, create solutions, and adapt to changes in their lives" (Yale, 2009).

## Respectful Conflict

To say a couple will never argue is hardly reasonable. Adults argue occasionally but when verbal altercations become commonplace between parents, the children are affected as well. The National Institute of Mental Health funded a study that found "kids who were worried about

their parents' regular conflicts tended to have more difficulties in school, often because they had trouble paying attention" (KidsHealth, 2009). When students feel their home is not secure, researchers believe that the uncertainty, "stress and emotional turmoil can add

up, which will make kids' minds focus more on the disputes at home rather than on what's going on in school" (KidsHealth, 2009). Researchers also found that kids who live in argumentative homes are more likely...

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### Special points of interest:

- ♦ *Healthy disagreements.*
- ♦ *Making divorce "bearable."*
- ♦ *Staying positive in times of difficulty.*
- ♦ *Making your child's school aware.*
- ♦ *How to effectively grieve.*
- ♦ *What can children do?*

## Respectful Conflict (continued)

at risk for anxiety, depression, aggression and difficulties interacting with peers” (KidsHealth, 2009).

When a code of conduct is established, “it can help make your disputes more productive and teach your children how to resolve conflicts respectfully in and out of the home” (KidsHealth, 2009). To turn destructive into constructive,



*Your kids will learn to dole out what they see and hear.*  
(KidsHealth, 2009)

the following is recommended:

\*Remain calm; kids do not need to hear yelling and cursing.

\*No name calling; choose words carefully as they can't be returned.

\*If too much tension exists, take a break or put some distance between you.

\*Apologize sincerely and forgive one another.

When arguments arise and the above guidelines are followed, agreeing to disagree can actually be healthy for children. “Kids need to understand that everyone gets upset sometimes and that it's important for people in a family to be able to tell each other how they feel and what they think – even when they disagree” (KidsHealth, 2009). Controlling your temper, maintaining composure, compromising, valuing another perspective, and learning to agree to disagree are all valuable lessons that last well into adulthood.

## Less Pain in the Process

Although we would like to take the pain away that divorce causes, there's no escape. However, there is a way to make the period more bearable. “It's important for divorcing, and already divorced, parents to sit down with their kids and encourage them to say what they're thinking and feeling” (KidsHealth, 2009). Feelings, thoughts and a timetable for healing are different for everyone. Children may experi-

Openly discuss feelings, positive and negative, with your kids.  
(KidsHealth, 2009)

ence a sense of loss, blame, guilt, betrayal or a combination. Emotions may come in waves and there may be periods of prolonged sadness. When the dialog for communi-

cation remains open, children know the door is open for discussion any time, adding to their security. A child who holds everything in for fear of making things worse only prolongs the healing process. “It may be tempting to tell a child not to feel a certain way, but kids have a right to their feelings; if you force the ‘happy face,’ your kids may be less likely to share their true feelings with you” (KidsHealth, 2009).

## A Smile Matters

When children are involved, the emotional pain of divorce can be increased ten-fold. For the child, as well as the non-custodial parent, the visitation schedule can leave both parties feeling cheated. “Even under the best of circumstances, separation and divorce can be disappointing for many kids”

(KidsHealth, 2009). Support from friends, relatives, counselors, and support groups become important

as children want reassurance and a sense of stability. When kids are able to meet others who have been through the same thing and parents are allowed to vent, both receive the support needed. Focusing on happy thoughts, looking forward to the future, and remaining positive



*“Seek support groups, friendships, and counseling.”*  
(KidsHealth, 2008)

will place pain and anger in their rightful position - one of healing. “Parents who can foster a positive adjustment and good times, even during difficult circumstances, will go a long way toward helping their kids – and themselves – adapt and move on” (KidsHealth, 2009).

## Partnering with Educators

Research has determined that “parent involvement at school, especially with non-custodial parents, can have a positive impact on a child’s performance at school”

(SPARC, 2009). Unless a court order says otherwise, both parents have rights to school information, as well as functions. You are allowed to -

\*eat with your child at school or visit his

REPORT CARD					
GRADING PERIOD		1	2	3	4
READING		A			
WRITING		A			
MATHEMATICS		C			
SCIENCE		B			
HEALTH		B			
SOCIAL STUDIES		A			
ART		A			
MUSIC		A			
PHYSICAL EDUCATION		C			
Grade Average		B			
Attendance	Present	100%			
	Absent	0%			
	Late	0%			
<small>A = Excellent B = Good C = Fair D = Needs Improvement            L = 3 Unexcused Absences (4 = Suspended) (5 = Expelled)</small>					
Teacher	Grade	Year			

*“The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act specifically states that both parents have the right under Federal law to access their child’s school records.”*  
(SPARC, 2009)

classroom.

\*attend school functions or activities, such as field trips.

\*view report cards or other school documents.

\*conference with your child’s teacher.

A child’s teacher knows her classroom and when a student is bothered, the stress can be observed on multiple layers. Reduced attention, withdrawing from friends, depression,

and not turning in assignments are just some of the signs students show when separation or divorce is affecting their home environment. “It is very difficult to act ‘normal’ when the very foundation of your life is being destroyed and you are not sure what is happening or why” (Yale, 2009). Parents and teachers can work together to ensure that a child’s educational as well as emotional needs are met creating a worthy connection of communication and honesty.

## Grieving in Healthy Ways

Children who live in unstable households are still disappointed when their parents separate or divorce. “Many kids grieve the loss of the kind of family they had hoped for, and children especially miss the presence of a parent and the family life they had” (KidsHealth, 2009). Here are a few suggestions for helping your child:

\*Take your child’s thoughts and feelings seriously. When children provide answers to their own questions, their “truth” is often worse than the realism of the situation.

\*When children are upset, they often act out. Allowing a child to communicate their feelings allows them to put their emotions into words.

\*Routine is important. When a child establishes familiarity with a situation, he is more likely to feel confident and secure in visitation and the changed relationships of both parents.

\*Minimize details. A child loves both parents and should not be forced to choose sides or hear unfavorable comments.

*“When possible, minimize unpredictable schedules, transitions, or abrupt separations.”*  
(KidsHealth, 2009)

Many parents are tempted to lean on their children for support. Children are not equipped mentally or physically to absorb the adult issues surrounding a divorce. If you need to talk, make sure it’s out of ear-shot of your child. When you begin to feel overwhelmed, there’s nothing wrong with asking for support or reaching out to others.

## Working Alone

When children are adjusting to a separation or divorce, the custodial parent may not have additional time to devote to their child’s specific feelings and needs.

Ask your child to keep a journal, writing down questions, concerns and worries. Set a time when your child can share anything she would like you to be aware of.

“Many movies have been made about divorce and step-families - some with happy endings, some not” (KidsHealth, 2009). Discussing how others approach divorce or change through the process demonstrates how others have coped with divorce. When children can visualize an end to the emotional chaos



*“Children have their whole futures before them.”*  
(Yale, 2009)

it helps place divorce in perspective.

Lastly, challenge an older child to locate comics or cartoons that are appropriate to your current situation, or write her own. Humor can be a “tension releasing device” (Yale, 2009).

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## March Q&A

*Q: How long will our divorce affect my child?*

Unfortunately, there's not a guide or timeline for families facing separation or divorce. Each situation and the circumstances involved are different. It is not uncommon for children to struggle with a divorce "for quite some time, the real impact usually felt over about a 2 to 3 year period" (KidsHealth, 2009).

Be patient and understanding when your child voices frustrations, concerns and questions. Be as honest as possible without disclosing too many details. Approach concerns with sensitivity and create a routine at the earliest opportunity. If you are too emotional or find speaking to your child too difficult for the time being, reach out to others. Friends and family members are often willing to help. State agencies regularly offer group support for parents as well as children. Joining with others may help you work through your worries, concerns and frustrations while at the same time, allowing your child to visit with others in similar circumstances.



## Resources:

KidsHealth. "Dealing With Divorce." [http://kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/Parents/divorce.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/Parents/divorce.html) (accessed February, 2009).

KidsHealth. "Helping Your Child Through a Divorce." [http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/help\\_child\\_divorce.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/help_child_divorce.html) (accessed February, 2009).

KidsHealth. "Parents' Fighting May Affect How Kids Do in School." <http://kidshealth.org/research/fighting.html> (accessed February, 2009).

KidsHealth. "Tips for Divorcing Parents." <http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/divorce.html> (accessed February, 2009).



Separated Parenting Access & Resource Center (SPARC). "Information for Educators Concerning Families of Separation or Divorce." <http://www.deltabravo.net/custody> (accessed February, 2009).

Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. "Divorce—The Broken Dream." <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1982/6/82.06.04.x.html> (accessed February, 2009).