**Divorce: Easing the Strain on Children**

Divorce is a fact of modern life that greatly impacts children of divorcing parents. It is a common prediction that 50 percent of all children born during the 1990’s will spend some number of childhood years in a single-parent household. Following are some tips for easing the strain of divorce on children.

**Easing Children’s Minds About Divorce**

The best of divorces can create stress for the children of the marriage, and the worst of divorces can leave life-long scars on the children born during the marriage. That is not to say that sometimes divorce is not the best (if not only) long-term decision. But the unfortunate reality is that divorce can symbolize the end of a child's world, from his or her perspective. The lack of stability and uncertainty about the future is very frightening for children. They may wonder whether their parents will still love and care for them in the new situation. Depending on his or her age, a child's emotions can range from extreme fear of abandonment, to anger and blame directed towards one or both parents. Given these facts, the best thing parents can do is to make clear their continued love and willingness to care for the child.

**Custody Disputes: Put Kids First**

As a parent, you can assist in bringing custody disputes to the quickest possible resolution. The sooner your child knows what his or her future living situation will be, the sooner the child will begin to reconstruct his or her world and regain some stability. If at all possible, you and your spouse should come to a compromise regarding custody prior to the time of trial. Courts are not necessarily in the best position to determine who should have custody of your children; you as parents are better equipped to make this determination.

Courts only see a small glimpse of what you and your soon-to-be ex-spouse are all about. Further, once it gets to the point of a full-blown custody dispute in court, all sorts of interesting things can start to happen. You may be surprised to learn that the smallest details of your life can be dragged before the court and used to paint a picture of you as an unfit parent. This is because, in order for a court to make a custody determination, it must determine what is in the "best interest" of your child.

Although the standard varies from state to state, when considering what is in the child’s "best interest," courts typically consider evidence regarding the following factors:

- Wishes of the child (if old enough to express a reasonable preference);
- Mental and physical health of the parents;
- Religion and/or cultural considerations;
- Need for continuation of stable home environment;
- Support and opportunity for interaction with members of extended family of either parent;
- Interaction and interrelationship with other members of household;
- Adjustment to school and community;
- Age and sex of child;
- Parental use of excessive discipline or emotional abuse; and,
- Evidence of parental drug, alcohol or sex abuse.

Depending on the state in which the custody decision is being made, other factors may be considered important when determining the child’s best interests. Indeed such things as a parent’s smoking status, current romantic relationship(s), and past working habits have all been raised in custody disputes. Such considerations can needlessly drag out court battles, depleting financial resources that could have been used for your children’s welfare.
Maintain Civility Throughout the Process

Avoid the "pawn" game. To further minimize the impact of divorce on your children, you should avoid using your child as a pawn to gain leverage in the division of your property, or in other financial disputes. Additionally, avoid allowing your children (especially older children) to use you as a pawn to receive the "easier" living situation. After divorce, children still need limits and consistent discipline. As hard as it is, try to continue to maintain a uniform front with your ex-spouse regarding expectations for desirable behavior (and limits on unacceptable behavior) for your children. In the long run, this too will help your child feel more secure.

Co-operate with your ex-spouse. You should also take steps to ensure an atmosphere of cooperation with your ex-spouse. Often divorcing parents think (or at least hope) that the divorce will more or less rid them of their ex. But, because they have children together, divorcing parents will still have to deal with each other for at least the duration of their children's minority. Therefore, cooperation is essential and will help keep you out of the courts in the future.

Avoid criticizing your ex-spouse, especially in the presence of your children. Instead, allow your child to have a good relationship with both parents. You have divorced (or are in the process of divorcing) your child's parent, but your child has not divorced that parent. Even when their parents are no longer together, children benefit from the love and support of both parents.

While no court can force you and your ex-spouse to work together, the more you and your spouse strive for mutual cooperation, the better your children will weather the divorce, both now and in the years to come.
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