



SEVEN STEPS TO BECOMING A POST-DIVORCE PARENT YOUR

Family

Establishing a set of unbreakable rules makes fulfilling any obligation easier. But when it comes to raising children — especially after a divorce — the rules change, and change again. ¶ “There aren’t any simple answers, but there are several things parents can do after a divorce to help children know that while they may have lost the family they loved,

BY MARGARET WINCHELL MILLER

they haven't lost a parent," says Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, author and emeritus professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.

"The entire issue of divorce is devastating," Brazelton says. "The child is the one at stake. The more each parent can be there, and the less turmoil they can cause between themselves, the easier it will be for the child to go through it. The real issue is whether the parents can stay friends or not. The way to help a child through it is to have both parents available."

That's easier said than done, of course. But, as I have found out in my own life, it *is* possible. The principles that follow offer a place to start. Incorporating them will give you the satisfaction of knowing you've provided everything you possibly can for the children you love.

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KIDS CAN COUNT ON



1. Take care of yourself.

You won't have much to give your children if you are a wreck yourself. Recognize that you are going through a tough time and seek help. If you won't do it for you, do it for your kids.

Darla Powell Phillips and her husband divorced when their daughter Jamie was in preschool. "Looking back, I went through a stage of thinking 'it must be me,'" she recalls. "*I'm intimidating, I'm not attractive enough.* ... Counseling helped me see beyond that and begin acting on my strengths."

Phillips' experience as a single parent enables her to help others who face enormous changes in their lives. As the founder of What's Next?!, a Houston-based coaching service that helps individuals and groups discover their passions, she recommends self-reflection as a part of the healing process.

"Focus on what you want to do right now," she advises. "Don't think back to what could have been or what you think you should have." After you discover what you want, whether it's finding a job, selling your home, or running a marathon, Phillips says, figure out a way to make it happen. "Rome wasn't built in a day. Some things will take priority over others. It's 'right now' that really counts."

Stay active, eat sensibly, rest, and seek the counsel of a professional if life presents more stress than you can gracefully manage.

2. Make as much peace as you can as quickly as you can.

All endings require periods of adjustment, and every individual has his or her own pattern and timeline when it comes to accepting change. Peace and harmony are difficult enough to maintain in unbroken families and can seem impossible after a separation or divorce. But it's important to recognize freedom from strife as a goal and to work toward it.



Divorce attorney Bill Ferguson left his law practice in 1985 and began working with couples who wanted to work more cordially with one another after divorce. In 2002, he founded Stop the Conflict, a program family law courts use to support people in taking conflict out of divorce.

“No matter how difficult the other person is, you have a choice in how to handle the situation,” Ferguson says. “You can put water on the fire, or fuel. It takes two people to have an argument. It only takes one to end it.”

When issues such as infidelity, addiction, or abuse have been part of a relationship, forgiveness can be especially challenging. Janice B. found that letting go of the pain her husband had caused her resulted in their ability to work together as parents in the years following their divorce.

“I decided that what truly mattered was our children and doing what’s best for them,” she recalls. “While the hurt and disappointment were still there, I made a conscious choice to put those feelings aside. I saw that one of the ways I could love my children was to work with their dad on issues that concerned them. It’s not always easy, but in the long run, parents who cooperate after a divorce can develop a respectful understanding that benefits everyone.”

3. Choose your battles and settle them privately.

Children of divorce already have their own set of feelings about the family break-up. Those who have to witness their parents’ post-divorce battles are burdened unnecessarily with questions and worries about their own safety and future.

“The well-being of the child after a divorce is directly correlated with how the parents can handle each other and the animosity and anger,” says Brazelton. “It’s up to the parents to make up to the child for it. If they can do that, the child can pull himself together and adjust. Without that kind of backup, I think they’re unlikely to do well.”

Children often invent what they don’t know, and their inventions can be much worse than reality. Fragments of an overheard conversation may ferment in a child’s mind, producing anxiety far out of proportion to the issue at hand. Whether you’re wrangling over a father failing to attend a school meeting or a mother asking one too many times whether she can take the girls for an extra night, find a private place to hold sensitive conversations and do your best not to let emotions get out of hand. Everyone will reap the benefits of your discretion and self-control.

4. Talk with your children every day — and talk with your ex-spouse about them.

In the months immediately following a divorce or separation, children want and need to stay in regular touch with the parent who is absent. Our sons were 5 and 9 when their father and I separated. Their dad, Kipp, moved into an apartment around the corner from our family home.

“We talked about the best time of day for me to call the boys when they weren’t with me,” Kipp recalls. “One of the first things I did was to help them memorize my new, easy-to-remember telephone number — something I kept in mind as I was setting up my new phone line, and I told them to call me any time. Sometimes I’d call the children before school or in the evening just to say hello or ask how

TO HAVE BOTH PARENTS AVAILABLE.” —T. BERRY BRAZELTON, M.D.

their day went. It kept us in close touch.”

Each period of childhood presents particular challenges in the academic, social, and spiritual aspects of your children’s lives. Adjustments to even minute changes can be more difficult for children and adolescents recovering from a shift in family dynamics. The death of a pet, a move to a new school, or simply being treated unkindly by a friend may trigger unexpected behavior in your post-divorce child. Discussing the children on a regular basis helps parents stay aware of their children’s shifting emotional sands and provides an opportunity to share information about incidents that may be of concern, enabling them to become better listeners and caregivers when the children need them most.

5. Live within a reasonable distance of your ex-spouse, especially when the children are young.

The decision about where to live usually falls to the parent who is moving out. If affordable housing is available in the immediate neighborhood, consider it. If not, try to be as close as physically possible — even if it means more modest accommodations.

Kipp and I found that a short distance between our two homes yielded great dividends. Drop-offs and pickups were more convenient. Living within a few blocks of one another enabled our boys to walk or bike between houses when they were older. Forgotten homework and baseball shoes were easier to retrieve since we didn’t have to

drive across town. Some parents will find this compromise unworkable, whether for emotional or practical reasons. But living fifty miles away from your child is better than 2,000; a two-hour drive beats a two-day drive or a long plane trip.

“The father’s being part of the child’s life is a critical part of the child’s feeling that two people care about him,” says Brazelton. “When a child’s father deserts him, it’s a terrible course.”

How can one parent avoid following the other from town to town or state to state in order to be near the children? Put it in writing. Our divorce decree mandated that neither parent could move outside the county lines without written permission from the other while our sons were still minors.

6. Be there for your children — even when it isn’t your turn.

When divorced parents pack their children off to the other parent’s house, whether for a week or a summer, they may feel that it’s finally *their* time. But it’s important that your children know they’re still your priority even when it isn’t “your turn.” Single dads who have made their kids feel welcome to visit at any time have the most satisfying relationships with their children.

“At first we had the typical ‘one-day-a-week and every other weekend’ routine,” recalls Kent S., whose children were 13 and 16 when he divorced. “Initially, my ex wasn’t understanding of my request to alter that



Help on the Web

www.divorceasfriends.com Bill Ferguson, a relationship and divorce expert, created this Web site to show, step-by-step, how to end conflict and restore cooperation. From helpful articles to divorce links, this site offers help through the difficulties of divorce and its aftermath.

www.parentswithoutpartners.com Parents Without Partners, Inc. is an international, nonprofit educational organization devoted to single parents and their children. It provides discussions, professional speakers, study groups, publications, and social activities for families.

www.divorcemag.com Billed as the magazine for “generation ex,” this publication includes articles on divorce-related topics ranging from tax issues to buying and selling a home.

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schedule. But she finally realized that my wanting to have them above and beyond my scheduled time would be good for the kids.”

There will be many opportunities to touch base with your children, and it’s important for them to know that you’re a caring, available parent, regardless of whose charge they’re currently under. Flexible schedules have become a way of life. Kipp and I often swap weekends or evenings if unexpected business trips or meetings come up. If you feel you’re taking on more of your parental responsibilities than the divorce

decree mandates, remember that if you were still married, you’d be seeing your children every single day. This truth helped us both put the inconvenience of being summoned on an off-weekend into perspective.

Children who have experienced divorce instinctively ask two questions, says Brazelton. “The first is ‘If I lose one parent, will I lose the other?’ They’re always afraid of loss. The other is ‘Was this my fault?’ That’s a big one. Parents have to be ready for those two questions. That’s why it’s so critical for both parents to hang in there and be available on some sort of predictable basis,” he says.

7. Don’t let money get in the way.

Establishing financial accountability does much more than ease the burden of the other parent. It sends a message to children that they can count on both parents to provide for them even when they’re not married any longer. Clearly state the financial responsibilities of each parent in your divorce decree, keeping financial obligations as fair and equitable as possible.

Leslie Brock, a financial advisor who works exclusively with individuals ending a marriage, notes that a divorce decree can’t pos-

sibly cover every financial issue the family will face in the future. Who pays for summer camp? What about birthday parties? Braces? Extra tutoring? Sports equipment? Compensation for these expenses and others must be negotiated before, during, or after the divorce.

“Couples who are amicable and can talk to each other may not feel the need to put everything in writing,” says Brock, whose own journey during divorce led her to begin assisting other couples in the process. “But parents who have difficulty working out details may find it easier to think these issues through early on and make them part of the divorce agreement.”

Finding Balance

“My most stressful time was at the very beginning, when I was still dealing with the pain of separation and working to overcome doubts about whether I could raise Kara,” says Geoff M., an English professor who divorced when his daughter was three.

“My life seemed to consist of making peanut butter sandwiches as I was running out the door,” he says. “I feel I’ve lived parts of *Kramer vs. Kramer*.”

Despite their differences, Geoff and Kara’s mother did everything they could to ensure their daughter’s happiness and sense of security. Now a grandfather, Geoff calls single parenting “one of the few truly great things I have done in life.”

Centuries ago, an insightful man bowed his head and asked for three things in what has now become a celebrated prayer: “*Grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, the courage to change things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*”

Acting with composure, courage, and good judgment whenever possible will help each of us — whether we’re married or not — to be the kind of parent our children can count on. ■

Margaret Winchell Miller is a freelance writer in Houston, Texas. She is currently at work with her former husband on a book about successful co-parenting after divorce.