

# “Stepping Back from Anger”

## PROTECTING YOUR CHILDREN DURING A DIVORCE

Every year, more than 1 million American couples get divorced. For those men and women, it is often the most grueling, emotionally exhausting, and expensive experience they will ever have. For their children, it can be even worse.

Imagine you are six, and suddenly the only people you have ever relied on for food, shelter, and love are at each other's throats. In your mind, you conclude that you might get lost in the shuffle. Before you know it, you think to yourself, there won't be anybody left to scare off the closet monsters.

To make matters worse, you often find yourself alone in your anguish, as the two people you usually go to for solace-your parents-are too wrapped up in their own anger and grief to be of much help.

It is unsettling, to say the least.

As parents, it is not enough to assume that your children will bounce back once the legal machinations of divorce are through. Though many adults find their post-divorce lives are vastly better than their pre-divorce lives, for many children, that is not the case.

Divorce makes its mark on children both in the short-term and the long-term. Young children whose parents are divorcing often suffer from depression, sleep disorders, loss of self-esteem, poor academic performance, behavioral regression, and a host of other physical and emotional disorders.

Long after the divorce is final, children of divorce often have trouble entering into committed relationships of their own, fearing their relationship will end as their parents' did.

In addition a Princeton University study showed that children who live apart from one of their parents are more likely to drop out of school, become idle (neither be in school nor have a job), and have a child before reaching 20, than children who live with both parents. Other studies have made similar findings, concluding that the effects of divorce on children are pervasive and insidious.

### TEN TIPS FOR DIVORCING PARENTS

Divorce is never easy on kids, but there are many ways parents can help lessen the impact of their break-up on their children:

**Never disparage your former spouse in front of your children.** Because children know they are “part mom” and “part dad”, the criticism can batter the child's self-esteem.

**Do not use your children as messengers between you and your former spouse.** The less the children feel a part of the battle between their parents, the better.

**Reassure your children that they are loved and that the divorce is not their fault.** Many children assume that they are to blame for their parent's hostility.

**Encourage your children to see your former spouse frequently.** Do everything within your power to accommodate visitation.

**At every step during your divorce, remind yourself that your children's interests-not yours-are paramount, and act accordingly.** Lavish them with love at each opportunity.

**Your children may be tempted to act as your caretaker. Resist the temptation to let them.** Let your peers, adult family members, and mental professionals be your counselors and sounding board.

Let your children be children.

**If you have a drinking or drug problem, get counseling right away.** An impairment inhibits your ability to reassure your children and give them the attention they need at this difficult time.

**If you are the non-custodial parent, pay your child support.** The loss of income facing many children after divorce puts them at a financial disadvantage that has a pervasive effect on the rest of their lives.

**If you are the custodial parent and you are not receiving child support, do not tell your children.** It feeds into the child's sense of abandonment and further erodes his or her stability.

**If at all possible, do not uproot your children.** Stability in their residence