

The Parents' Chat Room

By: Dr. Maulik Trivedi

Q: Dear Dr. Trivedi,

I am going through my divorce and it is a mutual agreement. I have a 12 year old son and a 10 year old daughter. The children's father and I share custody such that he has the children one week and I have them next week. I understand that divorces affect all family members but my children are getting out of hand. My son's teacher called me in to talk about his disruptive behavior, lying and not doing his work. His friend's mother called me to tell me that he was calling his friend names and that maybe they should not have anymore play-dates. He started middle school this year and that could also be one of the factors.

My daughter is shy but she seems more withdrawn and in her own world. We are trying to maintain a good relationship so that the children can see that we are adults about it. What is the best way to deal with this? My husband and I are open to ideas and suggestions to help our children. Do you think if they spent just every other weekend instead of the whole week with one of the parents it may help them with the transition?

A: Dear concerned parent, you present one of the most perplexing dilemmas of modern times. Let's face it, whether we accept it or not, divorce is a reality of 'family' life. What your question illustrates very well is that, as much as it is necessary for the adult couple, they must always consider the cost for the children involved.

Parental divorce is one of the highest stress-provoking events in a child's life, next only to death and major medical illness. Time of transition from being a family to being two families is particularly challenging for each family member as they adjust to the new realities. Although, once adjusted, things don't seem so bad. In fact, children are psychologically more easily adaptive than adults and yet, simultaneously, they are also psychologically more fragile. Therefore, creating the right atmosphere for adjustment is of paramount importance. Failure to successfully adjust can invariably pave the way to future personal and family problems in the child's life.

At a very basic level, children's developmental needs are comprised of two components. While they are dependent on an adult for most of their basic life-needs, they require nurturing support from their parent(s). Simultaneously, as future self-reliant citizens of society, they require guidance towards self-sustaining adult functioning. Having caring, compassionate parents, whether they are married or divorced, is the key to successful outcome.

The time of transition to being two families is particularly prone to problems because of two main reasons. On one hand, you have changing family structure creating vacuums in family function. Differently said, instead of having a two-person team to take care of families needs, now there are two one person units. As a direct consequence, on the other hand, there's less time available to attend to each individual problem identified. To sum it up, adjustment phase feels like a heap of constantly mounting problems in face of constantly shrinking time.

In face of such mental stress, adults undergoing a divorce are usually able to cope well. They are able to see the personal benefits gained from the divorce. Unfortunately, children often have little or nothing to gain personally from a divorce. The mental stress carried by children amidst the transitional period of divorce invariably spills out to daily life. Hence, poor coping with the stress of parental divorce often manifests as behavior problems in children.

Most parents amidst divorce find it difficult to carry out the necessary communication to help children adjust successfully. Open relationship and staying focused on the children's needs amidst an atmosphere of divorce can soften the negative impact on children. Here are some tips to assure smoother transition. 1. Schedule regular time. Present time for your children to be with each or both parents. 2. Provide undivided attention. Put aside the time constraint stress that comes with divorce for the time that you are committing to spend with the child. 3. Be available emotionally. Listen to your child's emotional expression. Provide gentle room to express their emotions while guiding their misperceptions as needed. 4. Build bridges towards better understanding. Build awareness of higher purpose to the harsh reality of a divorce through constant constructive communication. This will help the children see a new reality that is equally positive.

All of the above tips are only the starting point. There is a lot more beneath the surface, as you must have already come to know. There is no doubt that this is one of the most difficult emotional experiences that each individual in your family will ever have to deal with. Nonetheless, thinking it through and problem solving towards a healthy new reality can allow transition without much residual psychological damage.

I would strongly suggest that you consult with a professional in the field of family therapy. A professional can help children express normal troublesome feelings, alleviating the stress that leads to behavioral acting out. You should seek ongoing guidance and support until the problems you are witnessing have stopped for at least 6 months.

Finally, I invite you to watch a show called "Parenthood" that recently debuted on NBC. It reflects 'trials and tribulations' of family life right along with 'gifts and celebrations of family life.' It is sure to stimulate the right thoughts in your considerations. I thank you for your question and wish you safe, smooth and spiritually guided passage in your journey through life.

Dr. Trivedi is a Board-Certified Psychiatrist. He treats children, adolescents and adults.

Please send your questions to parentschatroom@citymasala.com