

A family is forever - even after divorce

Mar 25 2009 Agenda by Helen Jane Arnold

Divorce is often hardest on the children. **Helen Jane Arnold** sets out some ground rules for parents planning to split.

When couples [get divorced](#), the focus is often on their immediate future rather than the longer-term picture.

Securing a financial settlement and planning where their children will live will be uppermost in their minds. Those with a young family probably will not give much, if any, thought to how they will manage occasions such as their children's graduation or [wedding days](#)

However, you and your spouse standing shoulder to shoulder when your son or daughter is awarded their degree or walks down the aisle is likely to be the icing on the cake for your child.

For future family events to pass off happily, it is crucial to lay the foundations long before. It is not enough to hope that the passage of time will soften the jagged edges of your relationship to the extent that you can share the joy of your children's achievements.

The hard work needs to start at the moment of parting: how you manage your parenting – together even though you are apart – will make a big difference to your children's emotional wellbeing and their academic and professional success.

When marriages break up, the couples involved will be caught up with their own problems and it can be easy to sideline the needs of children. Lawyers, too, can make the mistake of focusing on the adult perspective of divorce.

Children can soon be affected by marital conflict, which is why it is vital to put them first from the outset. Resolution – formerly the Solicitors' Family Law Association – has launched an initiative as part of its 25th anniversary to help separating parents to do just that. Called "Parenting after Parting", it has published a handbook, also available online at www.resolution.org.uk/parentingafterparting/, and workshops around the country, including the West Midlands, to put children and their needs at the heart of family break-ups.

Children need to feel assured that both their parents will always love them just the same. They also need to understand they will have two homes, rather than one home and another household they visit from time to time. It is also vital that children are helped to realise their parents' break-up is not their fault.

Another point that is often overlooked is that when couples go their separate ways, the marriage is considered a "failure". Not so. Children are the very product of a successful marriage and they need to understand that.

This success means that parents can continue to celebrate their parenthood and to play active parenting roles, with careful planning and resolve. Couples may be singing from different hymn sheets from a personal point of view, but it's important they sing from the same one when it comes to parenting their children.

Resolution provides advice on how to manage the initial break-up, such as encouraging children to express their feelings. When youngsters are going through a difficult time, a parent's instinct is to want to fix it and take the hurt away, but one of the most helpful things they can do is listen and support their children's feelings. This helps youngsters learn how to identify and accept how they feel, and it also builds self-belief that they can handle difficult situations.

Handling the situation well practically, as well as emotionally, is also vital. Managing activities and events out of two homes may not be easy, logistically, but if both parents include the other in their plans, the opportunities for conflict and disappointment will be minimised.

Holidays can be a particular sticking point. But planning ahead and being upfront with all concerned about those plans will prevent potentially upsetting complications and resentment arising.

At the heart of the "Parenting after Parting" initiative is the acknowledgment that children can be deeply and adversely affected by marital breakdown – but that if handled correctly, with the youngsters' needs foremost, children can even benefit from their changed circumstances. As well as having two loving homes, they can enjoy two sets of holidays, two Christmases and two birthdays each year.

Parents can benefit from successful joint parenting too. The other parent can take time out to visit friends, enjoy lazy days or pursue interests that are not practicable when the children are around.

If children of divorced parents grow to feel they have gained an extra home rather than lost a mum or dad, then their parents have succeeded in giving them the greatest gift possible – the love, support and confidence that is every child's right. The parents will be able to feel rightly proud when they stand, shoulder to shoulder, on graduation day.

* The first "Parenting after Parting" workshops are on March 28 at City Inn, Brunswick Place, Birmingham, and Ramada Hotel, The Butts, Coventry. Contact Sarah Wilmshurst at sarah.wilmshurst@relaterugby.plus.com or 01788 565675

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