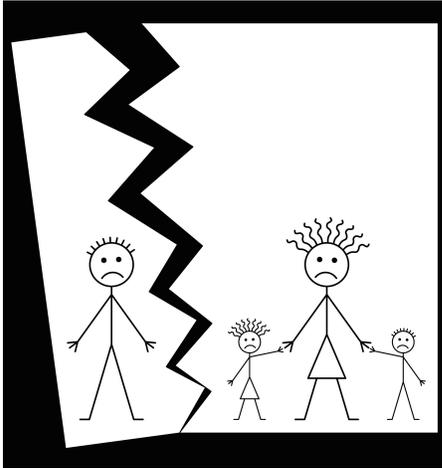


Putting Your Children First During Separation and Divorce - What it Really Looks Like



Often times, divorcing parents believe that they are acting in the best interests of their children when they battle over an issue. But this behaviour can create an atmosphere of turmoil. I have frequently heard that parents believe that they are hiding the real emotional about separation and divorce from their children. In my experience, though, children

are often more aware of what is occurring than we give them credit for. Children are constantly reading and interpreting the spoken and unspoken emotional landscape to which they are exposed. Adults can easily dismiss the voices of children, in the assumption that we know what is best. After all, we are the adults. In my experience, if you really want to know what is going on, ask a child. The next step is being able to do something with this as a parent and put the child's spoken needs first. This requires the parents to hear and understand the needs and have the ability to set aside their personal needs for the child. This can be extremely difficult for parents that are separated or divorced, as their emotional pain can still be running very high. The scenario's which I will discuss deal with divorces that, typically, do not involve emotional or physical abuse and addictions.

So, what does putting your child first look like when you are separated or divorced? It begins as an understand that your parenting relationship has not ended, even though your marriage has. Your children still see you, both, as constants in their lives. They want to love you both, without fear of reprisal from the other parent. For parents, this means respecting the other person's right to parent, and treating your relationship in a business-like manner. At times, parents can believe that arguing and becoming embroiled in lengthily legal battles is often necessary to solve a problem. For example, one parent is unhappy with the management of the child's homework. It is normal for two different people to have different approaches to parenting. Different is not bad. Children are adaptable and can learn different practices. What putting your child first looks like in this scenario: being "friends enough" with your co-parent. They are welcome to do things differently. Focus on *your* parenting and what *you* are doing with your child when they are in your care. But, even in the "best" of cases, there are certain scenarios in which parents can not come to an agreement- so what come next then?

If extra support is needed to help solve the parenting issues, involving a mediator, a collaborative lawyer, or a child psychologist are constructive ways to help solve your parenting problems. Keep in mind, though, that attending a meeting with a professional who is only trying to help the parties mediate or collaborate, under the assumption that you have nothing to change or are just “going through the motions” for the other parent, is not in your child's best interest. You need to own a part of this problem to decrease the tensions and to hear the impact that the problem is having on the child.

What this looks like from the perspective of an outside observer is listening, sincere reflection, receiving your child's comments without asking any questions, and coming to these meetings with an open mind in the knowledge that, like it or not, you are part of the problem. Make no mistakes; this latter point is no easy task. Genuinely letting down your defensive guard at the risk of exposing your vulnerabilities in order to listen to your kids can be very difficult. Often times parents are too entrenched in their own pain to tap into this when it is brought to their attention. As parents, we need to take a step back to see what might be getting in the way of hearing what our children have to say. When I work with children who are dealing with divorce, I feel my most important role is to hear the child's story and feelings, and help them develop a sense of meaning and control over what has happened in their life. What I hear most commonly from my child clients of divorce is that they just want everyone to get along. The pain in their eyes is heart wrenching when they speak of the impact the conflict has on them. Putting our children first, especially in separation and divorce, means understanding the value of our children, by listening to them and being supportive of their primary attachment relationships.



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