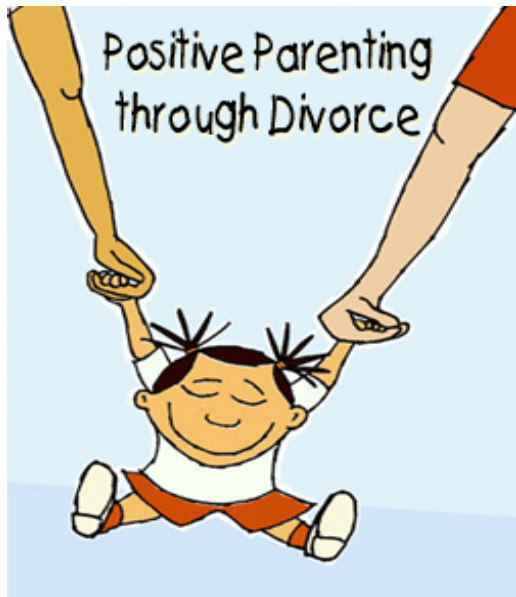


Children & Divorce

A Positive Parenting Approach



Paul Maione, Ph.D.

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Preface

Over the last 17 years, thousands of parents have taken and completed the Positive Parenting Through Divorce program. The approach to co-parenting you will read about in these pages was developed from insights and experiences gleaned over 20 years working as a family therapist with couples and families navigating through the divorce process. Additionally, the concepts and parenting methods you will learn in this course have been thoroughly supported by empirical research and clinical studies on effectiveness in co-parenting. Many parents first encounter this material because they are mandated by law to take a co-parenting class before their divorce can be finalized. Other parents are simply looking for practical, hands-on information for the many parenting challenges they face post-divorce.

The program has been revised and updated several times over the years to include current issues and trends and the feedback received has been overwhelmingly positive. After reading this book, and testing their knowledge of the material, most parents report having a much clearer understanding of the divorce process and particularly the resulting impact divorce has on children. The areas that parents say they found most informative are those on co-parenting strategies, the stages of divorce, and children's age-appropriate adjustments to divorce.

The best feedback we get is when parents report learning that divorce does not have to mean their kids will be forever damaged. We hope that, like our other parents, you find this material helpful. As I mention repeatedly in the text, divorced parents can raise emotionally healthy children if they follow some basic guidelines for co-parenting, understand their child's individual needs, and taking care of themselves.

Paul Maione, Ph.D.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book has one purpose: to help divorcing parents effectively care for their children and themselves during and after a divorce.

Divorce is part of our culture. You don't have to look far for it: movies, talk shows, books, and the Internet are overflowing with information about the causes and impact of divorce. Most people hold preconceived ideas about divorce, what it means and how it affects their lives and the lives of their children. One goal of this book is to provide practical information and strategies for divorcing parents. Another aim is to debunk some limiting, stereotypical, and outdated beliefs about divorce and raising healthy children.

Most people know there will be changes in their lives. Few, however, recognize just how significant and unsettling these changes may be. The good news is that not all changes are bad, even if changes of any kind take some getting used to. The decision to divorce starts a chain of events that occur over time. The choices you make during that time greatly affect how well your children adjust and whether they develop any significant or lasting difficulties. Taking the time to read and think about the ideas presented here should be helpful. Learning about the emotional, psychological, physical, and legal aspects of divorce will help you and your children deal with the inevitable changes associated with a divorce.

The number of single-parent families in America continues to increase, as it has for the last 25 years. Most experts agree that roughly one out of every two marriages end in divorce. Of second marriages, between fifty and sixty percent end in divorce. Forty percent of remarriages never make it past their 4th year. Overall, it's estimated that one million children per year experience the impact of divorce. More important than these statistics, most experts agree that continued conflict between parents is the most harmful aspect of divorce and the most detrimental to children.

Effective co-parenting (and that term embodies a variety of concepts and behaviors) is critical. It can be the most powerful antidote to the stress on children. Depending on their age, it is not uncommon for children to feel rejected, abandoned, confused, and hurt. Parents may feel overwhelmed by their own stress and emotions. However, it is crucial for parents to recognize their children's age-appropriate needs and take the steps necessary to reassure children that their parental roles will continue.

The degree of stress that children experience during a divorce usually increases with any additional turmoil in the family, which can easily result from parents' own distress. Problems begin to fade as parents regain their own emotional stability and can provide more nurturance and support. For this reason, parents must remember to be parents first and foremost with respect to their children before, during, and after the termination of marriage. Generally speaking, problem behavior in children can range from nonexistent to prolonged difficulty years after the divorce is final. There is no such thing as a typical divorce, however, and you must find out what works and is effective for your individual family.

Most research and experience tells us that children successfully adjust to divorce if parents create specific necessary conditions. For example, open, age-appropriate communications, clear boundaries and limits, and stable routines all help children develop the internal controls necessary for healthy adjustment. Problems appear in families who are chronically stressed with instability and continued open conflict. Current life circumstances can play a critical role in children's long-term problems. In the next chapter, we begin the discussion on the stages of divorce and what parents can do to begin to create a healthy and stable home environment for their children.

Chapter 2

Deciding to Divorce: The Initial Stages

The first step in implementing a positive parenting approach is to recognize that divorce is not a single event but rather an ongoing process. When you focus on divorce as an event, it's natural to want to gain control over it. Viewing divorce as an ongoing process, however, permits a broader perspective and greater flexibility. It is also important to remember that no two divorces are alike. People enter and move through the various stages of divorce differently, and personal experiences will vary. While some general signposts are clear enough, there are no exact guidelines to describe each and every divorce, or to prescribe how individuals should deal with various situations and issues.

The initial stage of most divorces occurs when one or both spouses decide that the marriage is over. Sometimes divorce is preceded by a physical separation, in which one spouse moves out of the family home. In other cases, parents live together until the divorce is final. At some point, however, parents are faced with the task of establishing two separate households. When both parents agree on separation, this step can bring about a sense of relief—especially if the home environment was tense, stressful, or filled with the pain of continued arguments. Sometimes parents' best efforts to work on their marriage can actually create more stress. Parents often report noticing their children experiencing some emotional relief during the initial stages of a separation. If you notice signs of distress in your child or children, listen to their concerns, take them seriously, and remember that as they grow more familiar with having two homes, they should begin to feel better.

For many families, separating and establishing two households can be emotionally painful, especially if one or both parents do not want to separate. Positive parenting requires that parents take care of their own needs as they are caring for their children. Because parents who can successfully deal with their own emotional issues during this time are much better equipped to help their children, they should take time to work on the painful emotions that separating can engender. Those emotions may initially include fear, worry, anger, and frustration, to name just a few. Parents who do not have constructive outlets for their own emotions are more likely to express them in ways harmful to themselves and their children. Finding ways to discuss your feelings, get objective feedback, and receive encouragement can help you make balanced and healthy decisions for your kids.

Similarly, parents and children both suffer when parents' negative feelings lead them to treat each other poorly. Parents should strive to treat one another with respect. Since conflict is a normal part of life, it would be unrealistic not to anticipate disagreements. However, parents should actively engage in working out conflicts as long as it is done in a safe context for both of them, and as long as children are not present for escalating arguments. Positive parents make this one of their most important priorities at this stage of the divorcing process.

Most children, regardless of their age, either know or intuit that their parents are having difficulties. Still, it is important to limit their exposure to excessive arguing. Adults who experienced a divorce as young children often note excessive parent conflict as the most problematic aspect of their parents' divorce. Parental arguments in the children's presence usually leave the children feeling caught in the middle. Parents can minimize this hazard by making deliberate efforts to keep their conflicts away from the kids, and by resisting the temptation to communicate with one another through the children. Children learn as much from their parents' divorce as from observing their marriage, and parents can help make those lessons positive ones by maintaining respectful and caring relationships with one another. When we speak about caring for your ex, we mean caring for your children's sake, not a romantic type of caring.

What is the best way to discuss divorce with our children?

A positive parenting approach focuses on communicating with your children in age-appropriate ways. Most experts agree that both parents together should speak with their children about the decision to separate or divorce. Many can do this even if one of them does not want the divorce. It is certainly OK for children to see that parents are struggling emotionally. They must also see their parents successfully manage those difficult emotions. If one or both parents prefer or feel obligated to discuss the divorce separately, be honest with your children about what is happening, but speak in neutral terms. Be sure not to assign blame to the other parent. As common-sense as this advice is, it is a very common trap for parents to fall into. In addition, let children know that they are not to blame for the divorce. Be prepared for a wide range of reactions, and make room for whatever responses they have. Do not necessarily expect their initial reaction to be permanent. Remember also, that most children ask a lot of the same questions repeatedly. This is a normal way of gaining a sense of security about their future. Try to curb your frustration and answer them lovingly and consistently.

Let children know often that both parents will always love them and that you will always be a family. The difference will be that Mom and Dad are living in separate homes. Remind your children that you will always support them in having relationships with both parents. Let them know that you are parents forever, and that they will never be abandoned. Remember that for younger children (between the ages of three and seven), short, clear explanations are best. For older kids, lengthier explanations may be appropriate, but be careful not to over-explain. Children will often perceive added details as a move toward getting them to take sides. It is important to remember here that divorce is a process, and your child's understanding will continually evolve with time. As children experience more of life, their ideas about divorce in general and their own situation in particular can change dramatically.

You should stress to your children that the separation/divorce is occurring because of differences between Mom and Dad. Always refrain from speaking badly about the other parent. To accomplish this, you must have other outlets to deal with difficult feelings regarding the other parent. You will ensure a quicker, healthier, adjustment when you are able to respect and care for the other parent despite difficult feelings. Being able to do this will also aid in your own ability to move on and be happy.

Positive Parenting, at this early stage, requires parents to balance stability and change. You should make every effort to keep stability in your child's life while recognizing that divorce is a context for change. The transitions associated with a divorce are wonderful opportunities for children to learn and accept change as a part of life. We can't always predict or choose when our children will get to learn certain life lessons. However, we can look for and embrace such opportunities when they arise.

How do we make decisions as parents once we are divorced?

Co-parenting is the term used to describe the process of parents working together to meet the needs of their children. Co-parenting responsibilities apply to all people—whether they are single, married, divorced, adoptive, grandparent, guardian, or foster care—who are entrusted with the responsibility to care for children. Co-parenting, however, almost always takes more work, communication, and lifelong commitment than most people initially expect. Parents who understand the importance of co-parenting and learn effective co-parenting strategies greatly assist their children through the changes associated with separation and divorce. Whenever possible, both parents should be involved in the decisions that keep children safe, healthy, and thriving. Many parents, because of difficulties beyond their control, will be faced with making the majority of decisions themselves. For some, this is a relief because having the other parent's input would be more stressful. For other parents, this can be a source of stress because they are going it alone.

If you are taking this class, chances are that you or somebody else thinks it's a good idea for you to share in a child's co-parenting responsibilities. Some of the more important decisions parents should make together involve children's living location and arrangements, education, religion, discipline, medical treatment, finances, and emergencies, to name a few. Even parents who are happily married have different ideas about some or all of these issues. This is normal. It would be unrealistic to assume that divorced parents share the same ideas about all of these important issues either. Of utmost importance is how well you deal with differences when they arise. Do you get into a power struggle that you feel you must win? Are you willing to compromise? Are you willing to choose your battles? Are you willing to agree to disagree? Few parents are able to integrate these strategies when a separation or divorce is new. However, in time and with practice, they can become second nature. Let's take a close look at each of these below.

Power struggles are very common in relationships. Often, divorcing parents will continue a power struggle from their marriage years after their divorce is final. The first step toward eliminating power struggles is awareness. Some parents experience this as, "When I say 'up,' he says 'down'"; "when I say 'black,' she says 'white.'" When you identify this kind of pattern, at first just observe it in action. This observing can lead you to some very interesting and creative strategies for interrupting the escalating cycle.

Compromise is another essential tool for the positive parent. It means being willing to set aside some of your tightly held beliefs about your children and what is best for them. This is easier said than done. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for compromise to be contagious. Often, when one person begins to compromise, (especially in a relationship previously defined by power struggles), the other person begins to follow suit. Parents often ask how long they should compromise in the face of the parent who refuses to meet in the middle. Many parents in this situation justifiably continue to compromise, as the best way to address their children's best interests. Other parents find it necessary to stand up to the other parent and demand some concessions. You have to take what you know about your co-parent and the specific issue in question, and make the best decision for your family.

Most parents learn early on that child rearing requires you to choose your battles. You can't get upset at everything that goes wrong, or you will be upset most of the day. Similarly, focusing too much on the differences in parenting styles will be frustrating. Choosing your battles means identifying your priorities and reserving your passion for discussing these issues. For example, if you consider school a priority, you should discuss school-related concerns and challenges with the other parent. Consistent nightly bedtimes might be important to you, something you enforce in your home. However, avoiding this issue--especially when your co-parent has different ideas about bedtime--is a good idea. Cultivating an atmosphere of cooperation is more important than agreement on any one issue. Usually, when emotions cool, and parents can be more objective, issues can be discussed in a more cooperative way.

It is important to provide your co-parent with some flexibility and room to be a parent. Whenever possible, look for opportunities to compliment your co-parent on their parenting abilities. Start small and build on whatever is working well. This can help defuse stressful situations and lay the groundwork for future cooperation.

On the other hand, constant arguing among parents creates stress for everyone. Parents fighting to be right or to get their own way puts children in the middle, fostering angry feelings and difficulties in their own intimate relationships later in life. Relating maturely and with a healthy sense of respect for one another is simple but not easy. Your challenge as a divorcing parent is to help create a context where your children learn about love, life, change, and family relationships.

Why is a stable home environment important, and how do I accomplish this?

Children, like adults but even more so, thrive on structure and stability. When our lives are stable we feel secure, and this security helps us feel good about ourselves. While divorce is a time of transition, parents can minimize the stress of these changes by planning ahead and involving children (in age-appropriate ways) with what is going on. Some changes children might experience include moving, changing schools, variations to normal routines, spending time with parents separately, making new friends, and adjusting to different schedules. The more areas you can keep stable, the better--especially sources of support like family, friends, and school. When changes are inevitable, you'll want to discuss them with your children

ahead of time. This will help reduce their stress levels. However, it would be unrealistic to think that a family can experience a divorce without any changes. Remember that learning about transitions in life is not a bad thing, and your child can learn valuable life lessons in adjusting to change. Take the opportunity to teach your children about change, and even share with them your own struggles. It cannot be overstated that the more parents are comfortable with and accepting of the changes they are facing, the more comfortable and accepting their children will be.

Keep in mind that it will take time to adjust to new schedules and routines. This adjustment period can last for several months. Do your best to anticipate this transition period, and make room for it. But don't worry; eventually your routine will begin to feel normal. You should also consider that each child will respond differently to the changes associated with a divorce. It is not uncommon for one child to be doing better than another initially. At some point, the reverse may be true. This is normal, and you should accept and acknowledge whatever reaction your child is experiencing in the present.

The Stages of Divorce

As we discussed in Chapter One, divorce should not be viewed as a single event. It should now be clear that the divorce process unfolds over many years. The process can be divided into three stages, each with specific implications for your children's health. The first stage is the *immediate crisis stage*, which usually lasts two months to a year. For many children, this is a time of shock and disbelief. Even when parental conflict has been high, most children are surprised and often saddened their parents are getting divorced. Their sense of stability, and their belief that their family will always be together, is altered.

Conflict between parents is perhaps the most serious stressor during this phase. At this early stage, parents may spend less time with their children and be less sensitive to their children's needs. In most crisis situations, parents instinctively protect their children; but in the crisis of divorce, parents are frequently preoccupied with their own issues and concerns. This is difficult for children, who often feel the most needy, sad, and anxious during the initial stages of divorce.

In the *short-term aftermath stage*, which can last up to two years, the turmoil and shock of the first stage gives way to a deepening recognition of the realities of divorce. Conflict and hostility between parents can be serious sources of stress for children. Older children are frequently used by their parents as allies, pawns, or go-betweens. Many parents, even without meaning to, burden their children with private, adult aspects of the divorce.

Some parents allow children to sleep in the parent's bed during this phase. Sleeping alone is a developmental achievement for children, and they acquire a firmer sense of independence, autonomy, and competence by being able to manage this type of separation from parents. Allowing younger children to sleep in a parent's bed on a short-term basis for comforting purposes is not necessarily harmful, but moving back to their own bed as soon as possible is usually advised.

The last stage is the *long-range period* of divorce, which may begin anywhere from two to three years after the initial separation and may be prolonged due to unresolved custody or financial battles. Many parents remarry during this stage, sometimes leading children to feel displaced. Also, children who get along well with a stepparent may struggle with feelings of disloyalty toward their biological mother or father. Talk your children about these feelings, and in time, their discomfort should ease.

Keys to creating a healthy and stable home environment

- ✓ Provide structure and routine in your child's day.
- ✓ Communicate with children about impending changes.
- ✓ Balance the changes associated with divorce with your child's need for stability.
- ✓ Provide children with age-appropriate consequences when rules are broken.
- ✓ Do not speak to your co-parent through your children.
- ✓ When dealing with your co-parent, remember to compromise and choose your battles carefully.
- ✓ Refrain from arguing and excessive conflict in front of your children.
- ✓ Be your co-parent's biggest supporter (when it comes to your kids).
- ✓ Do not burden children with adult responsibilities.
- ✓ Take care of your own needs so you can be there for your kids.
- ✓ Encourage children to speak about their feelings but don't make it mandatory.
- ✓ Read books about parenting after divorce and moving on (see the reference list at the end of this guide).

Chapter 2 Review Questions

1. **Which of the following is true about divorce?**
 - A. It is always damaging to the kids
 - B. It is not a single event but an ongoing process
 - C. It is harder for women than for men
 - D. It can be predicted before it happens

2. **One of the best ways for parents to help their children is to:**
 - A. Move to a different town
 - B. Take care of themselves
 - C. Ease up on discipline for while
 - D. None of the above

3. **Looking back, adults whose parents divorced when they were children report being most troubled by:**
 - A. Changing schools and friends
 - B. Excessive discipline
 - C. Moving
 - D. Excessive parent conflict

4. **Most experts agree that parents should:**
 - A. Together speak with their children about the decision to separate or divorce
 - B. Tell their kids about the divorce just before it is final
 - C. Keep their jobs
 - D. Continue going on family vacations

5. **In an effort to effectively co-parent, parents should:**
 - A. Hide their differences
 - B. Disagree openly and often so kids get used to it
 - C. Accept that differences are normal
 - D. All of the above

6. **When parents are accepting of the changes associated with divorce:**
 - A. They usually move on too quickly
 - B. Their children become more accepting as well
 - C. School problems are likely to surface
 - D. Children will avoid sharing their feelings

CHAPTER 3

The Legal & Financial Aspects Affecting Children in Divorce

The courts in this country are responsible for handling the legal aspects of divorce. One or both parents retaining an attorney or family mediator usually begins the legal process of divorce. Some couples inform their attorney from the start that they want a fair and equal settlement and to minimize conflict. This approach is recommended. To accomplish this, find an attorney accustomed to working this way, one who helps mediate differences and works toward collaboration and compromise. This will be in everyone's best interest. A good way to choose an attorney is by getting a referral from a trusted friend or colleague. You will probably want to interview several attorneys, making sure you feel comfortable with their approach. Do not feel bullied into retaining an attorney not to your liking. Many attorneys will do an initial consultation for free, so you can decide if they will represent you effectively given the specifics of your situation.

In most states, proceeding with the dissolution of marriage requires that couples begin dealing with some difficult issues. These include financial support, visitation, and dividing up marital assets. In many instances, parents settle these issues on their own or with their attorneys' assistance outside of court. Family-court judges prefer that divorcing parents settle their issues before reaching the courtroom, reserving formal trials as a last resort.

Should we use a mediator?

While many people still opt to retain their own attorneys, more and more couples are looking for alternatives to the traditional adversarial divorce. Today, many couples consult family mediators to assist with sensitive child-sharing and custody arrangements. Mediation is the process of finding a mutually acceptable settlement to the disputed issues in the divorce. It is a cooperative method, while attorneys often become adversarial. Mediators are individuals who have specialized training in conflict resolution, and they can either be court appointed or retained directly by divorcing spouses.

The mediator's job is to help couples resolve their various logistical sticking points without getting bogged down in personal conflict. In a safe, non-threatening environment, an effective mediator will help identify important issues, consider both parents' perspective and opinions, and ease conflict around differences or painful topics. When parents begin old patterns of arguing and disagreeing, a skilled mediator will keep the focus on the issues at hand and remind parents that attacking one another is not helpful to the mediation process, nor to the health and well-being of their children. Keep in mind that roughly 96 percent of all divorces filed never go to trial but are settled beforehand. Therefore, if you can work from a reasonable balance of power and compromise, it makes sense to work out your settlement together with a skilled negotiator, rather than under pressure from the court.

General Legal Terms and Concepts

(Keep in mind that these will vary from state to state.)

Parental Responsibility

Shared parental responsibility is an arrangement in which both parents have full and shared parental rights and responsibilities regarding their child/children. In addition, parents are strongly encouraged to reach agreement on the foreseeable major decisions that will affect their child's welfare. Shared parental responsibility is the way many divorced cases are settled.

Sole parental responsibility is the legal term for one parent being awarded and assuming complete care, custody, and decision-making for child rearing. Sole parental custody is usually awarded only if shared responsibility would be harmful to the child. The standards for awarding sole parental responsibility are based on the best interests of the child (explained below). It's important to recognize that an award of sole parental responsibility does not preclude the court from entering an order for child support or visitation.

In a divorce settlement specifying shared parental responsibility, one parent is designated the *primary residential parent* and the other the *secondary residential parent*. These designations are separate from the issue of custody, and each parent has the right and responsibility for day-to-day decisions affecting the child's health, maintenance, and welfare while in that parent's care.

The *primary residential parent* is ultimately responsible for co-coordinating the needs of the child and ensuring that the child is enrolled in school, has proper inoculations, medical treatment, clothing, food, etc. This parent's residence is the child's legal address for school-attendance purposes; in practice, the child generally spends more time at this residence, but the primary residential parent is not necessarily the custodial parent. After considering all relevant facts, the courts generally give each parent the same consideration in determining the primary residential parent.

Secondary residential parent means the parent who maintains full rights and responsibilities, but whose residence is not listed as the legal address of the child. The child will spend time in this residence during periods mutually agreed upon by the parents or ordered by the court. Secondary residential parents have the right to:

- Visitation and communication with the child (unless a court orders otherwise)
- The right to participate in providing the child with a sound moral, social, economic, and educational environment
- The right to access to school, medical, and other records
- The right to authorize emergency medical treatment
- Other rights that may vary from state to state or from case to case

The secondary residential parent's responsibilities are roughly the same as those of the primary residential parent:

- Providing a sound moral, social, economic, and educational environment
- Consulting with the primary residential parent on questions related to religious upbringing, discipline, financial matters, moral training, social and recreational activities, and non-emergency medical and dental care
- Notifying the other parent promptly of any serious illness or accident
- Making all reasonable efforts to communicate with the other parent and encourage and facilitate communication between the child and the other parent

Best interests of the child

In every state, the court's primary concern in addressing child-related issues is the *best interests of the child*. The needs of children will be placed ahead of the needs of the parents in the divorce settlement. It is best if both parents are comfortable with the arrangement they have worked out and can implement it with a high level of confidence. When parents are unable to accomplish this on their own, the best interests of children are left to the court. Individual states' exact definitions vary, but they generally include some or all of the following:

- The wishes of the parents, assuming they are determined to be fit
- The wishes of the child (in many states, the courts have been known to consider the wishes of children as young as 11 years old)
- The interaction of the child with parents and siblings
- The child's current living situation and adjustment in the home, school, and community
- The mental and physical health and stability of the individuals involved
- The parent who is more actively fostering a healthy relationship with the other parent
- The parent who prioritizes the child's needs and minimizes personal agendas
- The perceived stability of a given residence and the ability of a parent to preserve existing family lifestyle and activities if such are deemed proper and healthy to the child/children.
- Whether either parent has failed to make all child-support payments, including any debts under a child-support order
- Whether either parent previously has been convicted of or pleaded guilty to any criminal offense involving child abuse or neglect
- Whether either parent has established a residence, or is planning to establish a residence, outside the home state

The Guardian ad Litem

In determining the best interests of the child, courts often appoint a *Guardian ad Litem* to investigate the child's situation and make a recommendation to the court. The Guardian ad Litem (usually an attorney or specially trained layperson) has a duty to act on behalf of the child, advocating the child's wishes if the child is old enough to express a preference. He or she is responsible for protecting the child from the effects of adversarial court proceedings; monitoring agencies and individuals who provide health, education, and social services to the child; collecting records and reporting to the court; and ensuring that

the child's wishes are presented to the court. The Guardian ad Litem's recommendation is not binding on the court, but the court usually considers the Guardian's recommendation.

Child support

Every state has guidelines for establishing or modifying child-support arrangements. In Florida, the Department of Revenue is responsible for administering child support under the guidelines, which define a detailed formula for calculating expenses in relation to each parent's income. Both parents submit information on their income and expenses to the court, and the court then issues an order specifying the amount to be paid. In ordering child-support payments, the courts must either follow the guidelines or explain why not. The guidelines and a detailed worksheet can be obtained from the Florida Department of Revenue or located on the World Wide Web (<http://www.myflorida.com/dor/childsupport/pdf/poz8.pdf>), or check your state's Web site for the appropriate agency information.

There are several methods of paying child support:

- Direct payments to the other parent
- Direct payments to your state's central disbursement unit, either by mail or online
- Payroll deductions to your state's central disbursement unit

Some of the possible consequences for failure to pay child support include:

- Suspension of driving, hunting and fishing, and/or professional licenses
- Reporting of the debt to credit bureaus
- Liens against real estate and personal property
- Interception of IRS tax refunds
- Bank-account levies and garnishments
- Arrest warrants

Florida parents owed child support should contact the Florida State Department of Revenue or an attorney for assistance. The Department of Revenue's involvement in managing divorce arrangements is strictly limited to child support; the Department has no role in custody or visitation issues. Legally, child support and visitation rights are separate; one may not be made dependent on the other.

Visitation

Like child support, visitation rights are defined by state law, and courts need to be able to show reasons for denying or modifying the visitation rights of non-custodial or secondary residential parents. There is a wide variety of visitation schedules and arrangements, including various ways of handling holidays, vacations, special family times, and other scheduling issues. You'll need to explore with your children, your co-parent, and your attorney or mediator what works best for your family and situation. The rights and responsibilities of raising kids should be shared between parents, who should also encourage frequent contact with the other parent and act cooperatively and respectfully toward one another. If either

parent repeatedly fails to observe an agreed-upon visitation schedule, or does other things that can be shown to interfere with a child's health and well-being, the court can change visitation rights or legal custody. If your co-parent repeatedly fails to pick up or return your children as agreed, keep careful notes on what's happened and when, and contact your attorney or mediator for assistance. As tempting as it may be to withhold child support (or to withhold visitation if child support is not being paid as ordered), that kind of retaliation really only hurts the child. Worse, the result may be that both parents wind up in trouble with the court—and there's nothing in the law that says both parents can't lose custody altogether. It's best to stay focused on the issue at hand and work with the legal system to address the best interests of your child.

Final Judgment

The *final judgment* is a document signed by the judge, officially ending the marriage and defining the terms of the divorce by court order. This document specifies:

- Division of assets and debts
- Child-custody and parental-responsibility assignments
- Alimony and child-support payments, where applicable
- Responsibility for financial issues like provision of health insurance and life insurance
- Financial and legal rights like visitation and tax exemptions
- Other issues that can vary from case to case

Modification

A *modification* is a change in the final judgment based on a request from either party and approved by the divorce judge. Only an extraordinary and substantial change in circumstances will merit a modification, and either spouse may file a petition to modify the final judgment. Different petitions apply to changes requested in different parts of the final judgment; two examples are the Supplemental Petition to Modify Custody or Visitation and Other Relief, and the Supplemental Petition for Modification of Child Support. These forms are available from attorneys and mediators, or from the Web site of your state courts (in Florida, see http://www.flcourts.org/gen_public/family/forms_rules/index.shtml).

Parental Alienation

Parental alienation is a process that can occur between two parents who are consciously or unconsciously trying to influence the children at the emotional expense of the other parent. Named by Dr. Richard Gardner, *Parental Alienation Syndrome* (PAS) is a distinctive family response to divorce in which the child becomes aligned with one parent and preoccupied with unjustified and/or exaggerated denigration of the other parent. In severe cases, the child's once love-bonded relationship with the target parent is destroyed. If, however, the reason(s) for the alienation can be substantiated by documented abuse or neglect, then the alienation is necessary for the child's safety and well-being, and PAS would not be an appropriate designation or explanation for the children's feelings or the alienating parent's actions.

Financial Issues

Divorce means more than physically separating as a family. It also means separating your family finances. Both types of separation can bring great emotional stress. You will be better off financially, however, if you can keep your emotions from influencing your financial decisions. At the very least, you will be able to make better financial decisions for yourself and your children. The following information will help familiarize you with some issues that accompany the division of finances during a divorce. It is not intended as a complete guide or as a substitute for legal or financial advice.

How do we begin to separate financially?

During a marriage, one spouse usually takes primary responsibility for managing finances and keeping financial records. If you are not well informed, this is your opportunity to be involved in your financial affairs. Many people feel anxious when considering finances, but realize that it is mostly about gathering information and making decisions. The sooner you begin participating in your financial decisions, the sooner you will have the peace of mind that you are taking the necessary steps. Remember, knowledge provides you with a more realistic view of your financial situation as decisions are made. Even in "friendly" divorces, you should not rely on fate to determine what do about shared property or joint accounts. Be aware that accounts shared jointly can be accessed by both parties. In addition, each person authorized to use a credit card can run up an extensive bill. Try to be objective about your situation and use some common sense. Your immediate goal is to reduce your financial ties to the person you are divorcing; your ultimate goal is to create two financially separate households. While it is usually impossible to sever all financial ties, you can greatly reduce the areas where you are at risk. Seek the advice of an accountant or financial planner to help you learn about various financial issues.

How do we divide property?

In general, each person is entitled to an equitable or fair distribution of the property. Property includes automobiles, homes, and furniture, in addition to possessions such as cash-value insurance policies, pension funds, savings accounts, etc. As you negotiate the division of property, think about your needs and the needs of your children, as well as the financial consequences of your decisions. Frequently, material items that you valued during your marriage may have little value once you are divorced. It is not uncommon for people to spend a great deal of time arguing over material possessions. It can also be a ready-made battleground for continuing past marital arguments. Choose your battles carefully, and realize that you will be making some concessions when it comes to material possessions. Ultimately, you and your children will be better off if you can minimize the conflict around dividing property and material possessions.

How should we deal with debt?

When you divorce, you divide not only property, but debt as well. In general, you both are responsible for paying any debts acquired during the marriage. Managing debt issues carefully during the divorce

process may lead to less conflict and a more stable environment for you and your children. You should act promptly to close all joint credit cards or other lines of joint credit. Be sure to establish credit in your own name before doing so. Often, you can open an individual account when you close a joint one. A credit card can help you through some short-term emergencies during the divorce transition. However, avoid saying, "charge it," rather than making necessary cuts in spending after divorce. Make a list of the outstanding balances on any credit cards or other debts. Get the address of a credit bureau from the phone book and request a credit report to make sure you are aware of all open accounts. Once the divorce is filed, debts should be divided between you and your spouse, and each person should be responsible for payment of his/her debt.

Remember that even after the divorce is final, creditors may attempt to collect on debts from both partners. A divorce decree will be honored by the courts, but it may not matter to collectors—their goal is to collect the money. It is not always possible to remove your name from a joint debt until the debt has been paid in full. Finding out what your options are and remaining aware of your financial situation can help ease the financial separation that comes with the divorce process. This process will take time, but the payoff is a brighter financial future.

How do I handle my ex's failure to make timely child-support payments?

One potential problem with respect to finances involves late payment or non-payment of child support. While it is tempting for parents to consider withholding visitation rights in this circumstance, it is never a good idea. Experts agree that withholding visitation does children more harm than good, and it risks getting yourself into legal trouble as well. Instead, you should attempt to resolve the matter with the other parent directly. If you are unsuccessful, consult an attorney to help enforce correct and timely child-support payments. Be aware that you still have a responsibility to your children as you are dealing with stressful financial situations. Realize that your children will be aware of your angry feelings, even if you do not openly bad-mouth the other parent. Children of all ages know how parents feel toward one another, regardless of what is said.

In summary, be aware that finances are a big consideration when divorcing. Parents who can discuss financial issues calmly and fairly will ultimately save money. Remember to get professional advice where appropriate. In addition, realize that your children will fare much better and feel more secure when they see you handling adult matters (such as financial issues) with fairness, dignity, and respect.

Chapter 3 Review Questions

- 1. A commonly used alternative to the traditional adversarial divorce is:**
 - A. Consulting a mutually agreed-upon family friend
 - B. Consulting a family mediator
 - C. Both parents getting their own attorneys
 - D. Letting children help make decisions

- 2. It is estimated that approximately _____% of divorce cases are settled without a trial:**
 - A. 36
 - B. 56
 - C. 76
 - D. 96

- 3. When evaluating children's best interests, the court looks at:**
 - A. The parent with the most money
 - B. The parent who neglects to put the needs of the child over any personal or vindictive motivations
 - C. The parent most likely to foster a positive relationship with the other parent
 - D. The parent with the most stable job

- 4. Which of the following statements about finances is false?**
 - A. You should strive for two financially separate households
 - B. You should keep at least one credit card in both of your names
 - C. You should become aware of your financial situation as soon as possible
 - D. You should be prepared to make compromises around material possessions

- 5. When you are not receiving child support in a correct or timely manner you should:**
 - A. Begin withholding visitation
 - B. Let your emotions dictate your response
 - C. Avoid withholding visitation
 - D. None of the above

CHAPTER 4

Co-Parenting: Raising Happy & Healthy Children

What is co-parenting?

Co-parenting is a phrase used to describe how divorced or separated parents can be sensitive to their child's needs. It means learning to make decisions together that both serve their children's best interests and avoid putting them in the middle. Most serious problems occur when children are stuck in the middle of divorced parents who hate (or at least act like they hate) one another. Our recommendation (not something all parents want to hear) is that kids need both parents. In addition, experts in child development agree that in most cases, children will thrive best when there is input from both a mother and a father. While some may question this, there is little doubt that most damage to children in divorce results from being stuck in the middle of warring parents.

Studies have shown that when there is high conflict between parents, kids who have more frequent contact with a non-custodial parent fare **WORSE** than kids who see the non-custodial parent less frequently. This happens because there are more opportunities for these parents to argue and fight with one another in the presence of their children. It is not easy to collaborate with someone you dislike or hate. At the same time, remember, this is about your children.

Begin with the realization that healthy children have positive relationships with both parents. Your job is to begin focusing on those areas (however small they may seem) where you can feel positive about the other parent and what he or she has to offer your children. All parents have something to offer. Nurturing the seeds of what is good in the other parent can often help more positive things grow. This means that whatever good that parent has to offer should have some pathway of getting through to the child. Step back and look at your ex-spouse in the role of a parent. Many people make lousy husbands or wives but have the potential to be terrific parents. Don't assume that the parent he or she was in your marriage will be the same parent once you are divorced. Remember also that in some ways, your child identifies with your ex-spouse. On some very basic level, children have a sense that they are 50% Mom and 50% Dad. Any trashing of your ex inadvertently trashes 50% of your child. Also, children have a shared history with both parents, and a shared present and future. Your ex-spouse is an important part of your children's lives, and just as you would help your children succeed in school or sports, it is important to help them succeed in that relationship.

Encourage the other parent to stay involved in the children's school and extra-curricular activities. Respect your child's needs to have both parents there, without making them worry about the embarrassment of a public fight. If you cannot be civil with one another, work out an arrangement where your child does not have to witness ongoing conflict. If exchanging the children is problematic, you can find creative ways to minimize your contact with each other. You can arrange for someone else to send and pick up the children, or arrange the exchange at a neutral place. The key is to let your children go back and forth between homes with ease, rather than going through a minefield of conflict.

It is never too early to begin working on your negative feelings toward your ex-spouse. Having angry or painful feelings about your ex is not the problem. The problem comes when parents don't find appropriate ways of expressing and dealing with these away from their children. It is best to have a support system of family and friends, as well as a trusted mental-health professional with whom you can process these feelings appropriately. Don't expect to get through negative feelings overnight. Most parents report a back-and-forth process between negative feelings and a sense of resolve. Remember that this happens over time, and you have to find your own timetable. Parents who avoid dealing with these difficult feelings merely prolong the suffering for themselves and their children.

How do I deal with a parent who is sabotaging my co-parenting efforts?

Dealing with a parent who will not cooperate or negotiate under any circumstances is extremely frustrating. It can also make it difficult for you to make good decisions. It is all too easy to sink to the uncooperative parent's level and make choices not in your children's best interests. For example, one parent communicating adult issues through a child can tempt the other parent to do the same. Resist the urge to do this, and **keep doing the right thing**. Making good choices for your children must be your focus. Parents often wait years for the payoff, but it will be worth it.

Parents who are unwilling to cooperate on any level usually have unresolved anger, grief, sadness, or all of the above. One parent's unresolved feelings can create an emotional atmosphere that prevents both parents from remaining child-focused. Do not stoop to that level. Historical arguments are better left behind; leave the issues of your marriage in the past and resist playing out those never-ending conversations that just leave everyone frustrated, angry, and tired. Everyone feels the lure of these arguments, but they are dead-ends to cooperative parenting. Simply refuse to engage in such conversations, and continually stress that you are interested in communicating about what is currently affecting your child's life. Doing this consistently may help, in that at least you (and your children) won't have to be exposed to these dead-end conversations.

If you are stuck dealing with a difficult parent, especially when there is a pending court case, it is a good idea to keep good records of all your interactions. Keep track of whether they are keeping their commitments to any original agreements regarding custody, visitation, appointments, and providing consistent positive messages to the children.

What if I suspect my child is being abused or neglected?

An exception to the preceding discussion is when children are in jeopardy from abuse or neglect. These are the only reasons to keep a child from seeing the other parent without supervision or appropriate safeguards. When there is an element of such danger, you must get the assistance of the courts, police, and anyone mandated to become involved in protecting the safety of children. In all other disagreements, attempts to foster positive relationships with both parents must be made in the children's best interests.

If you are faced with a parent who refuses to keep to an agreed schedule, or is putting your children at serious physical or emotional risk, then consulting with legal counsel and/or child protective agencies may be necessary. However, under no circumstances should you make a false report of abuse or neglect. Unlike abuse and neglect, bad parenting is not against the law.

Another point to keep in mind is that both of you, as parents, are experiencing changes. For example, spending time alone with your children might be a new experience for you. Sharing custody is a further adjustment, especially if you are used to having access to your kids at all times. You may feel differently about how the other parent is handling a situation from your reactions while you were married. That is normal. Likewise, your feelings and emotions as residential or non-residential parent may alter how you choose to deal with situations in the future. Try to understand that the other parent is in a different role that may prevent them from handling a situation as you think they should. Allow for differences. Your children will adjust to your parenting differences, and they may even come to appreciate such differences.

How do I begin seeing my ex in a new light?

It is not easy to develop a new perspective about your ex solely as a parent. You will most likely have some leftover negative feelings as a former spouse. It can be particularly difficult when there was a lot of stress, tension, and difficult times during the marriage. Remind yourself that your common goal now is the well-being of your children. Issues that were alive and well in your marriage can be left in the past when you are dealing with present situations. Many parents feel they are doing a good job if they are not saying bad things about the other parent in front of the kids. This is good, but it is not enough. Most kids pick up on parents' actual feelings through subtle, usually nonverbal, cues. By getting support for yourself, you are less likely to create unhealthy messages even inadvertently. If you become overwhelmed with feelings of anger, resentment, jealousy, or revenge, make special efforts to address these with members of your support system or a good practitioner of mental health.

How do I balance my children's needs with my own needs?

Parents should realize that focusing on their own needs helps their children. Most children, regardless of their age, will feel secure if they sense their parents are emotionally healthy. Making time for yourself, while often difficult, is important. Healthy outlets include counseling with a professional therapist, meeting with friends or support groups, or any activity that brings you pleasure. Neglecting yourself makes it difficult to be effective with your kids' needs. You must have outlets for dealing with your own difficult feelings.

Be mindful that your needs and those of your children will often be very different. While you might be feeling angry, anxious, or depressed about your new living situation, it is entirely possible that your child feels a great sense of relief now that things have changed. Avoid assuming that your children feel or think exactly the way you do. Their experience of your ex is very different from your experience. That is the

way it should be. Remember, the relationship your children have with both parents is different from the relationship parents have with each other. You may feel betrayed or rejected by your ex-spouse, but that may not be what your child experienced. Parents and children rarely experience a separation and divorce in exactly the same way. If you suspect you are confusing your own feelings with those of your kids, get some outside objective feedback from someone you trust.

In the next section, we will explore one important way parents can create a stable home environment for their children: a well-thought out and flexible parenting plan.

What is a Parenting Plan?

A *parenting plan* is a written proposal by a parent indicating how two parents will handle their future relationship with their child. It contains provisions on custody, visitation, decision making, and many other co-parenting responsibilities. A carefully constructed parenting plan is an important part of raising healthy children after a divorce. A parenting plan must evolve with the changing needs of your children.

Therefore, it does not have to include every potential situation you may encounter. However, it must be revisited regularly to make sure it meets your family's needs.

As stated above, an effective parenting plan will outline how both parents will maintain a close and loving relationship with their children. Although the plan should contain many specifics, it should also permit some flexibility. You should be prepared to make occasional changes to schedule or routines if it will assist your co-parent. These times should be the exception and not the rule, however. Remember, when you show flexibility and understanding, you are loving your children; ideally, your co-parent is acting in kind. If they are not, keep doing the right thing.

Below is a summary list of what should be included in a parenting plan. This list is not exhaustive, and parents should use it as a guide to construct a plan that is right for them, their children, and their particular situation (see the "Reference" section for books with comprehensive information on how to create excellent parenting plans).

Things to consider when making a parenting plan:

1. **Schedules** will cover time spent with both parents on weekdays, weekends, the school year, summers, birthdays, vacations, and holidays. This section should also outline how changes to the schedule will be handled.
2. **Decision-making** will include day-to-day decisions like eating meals and ensuring that homework is done as well as major decisions like health care and moving.
3. **Information sharing** will outline how parents will communicate about the variety of issues that involve their children.
4. **Parent-child communication** should be addressed and provisions made for how children will communicate with one parent while with the other parent.
5. **Exchange of children for visitation** will describe schedules and places for the effective transfer of children from one parent to the other.

6. **Handling disputes** will provide a brief plan for how parents should deal with the inevitable differences and conflicts that arise when raising children.

Six Keys to Successful Co-parenting

1. How you feel about your ex is less important than how you act toward him/her. Putting aside your negative feelings is definitely in the best interests of your child.
2. Respect your need for privacy and the other parent's too. The only information that needs to be shared between co-parents is that pertaining to their children.
3. Both parents' time with the child is sacred. Don't make or change plans for the time your child is scheduled to spend with your ex. Honor the pre-arranged schedule.
4. Both parents have the right to develop their own parenting styles. As long as no abuse or neglect is happening, let your ex-spouse relate to your child as he or she sees fit.
5. Acknowledge what your ex-spouse has to offer your child. Remember the qualities that first attracted you. Those qualities still exist and are available to your child.
6. Expect to feel awkward and uncomfortable with this new way of relating. But keep affirming your commitment to the new relationship, and eventually your ex will begin to play by the same rules.

Chapter 4 Review Questions

1. **Which of the following statements is true?**
 - A. Raising healthy children usually means having input and contact from both parents
 - B. You should focus on what your co-parent does wrong so they can change it
 - C. Divorce is about your children, so forget your own needs
 - D. All of the above

2. **One common mistake parents make after a divorce is to assume that:**
 - A. Their ex is always right
 - B. Dealing with new relationships will be hard
 - C. Their ex will be the same parent after divorce as they were during the marriage
 - D. Children will have sleep problems

3. **Regarding negative feelings toward your ex, you should:**
 - A. See them as normal
 - B. Deal with them appropriately
 - C. Minimize your children's exposure to these negative feelings
 - D. All of the above

4. **Parents who are particularly uncooperative with the other parent are usually:**
 - A. Worried about money
 - B. Dealing with their own feelings of hurt, anger, and fear
 - C. Seen as right in the eyes of children
 - D. All of the above

5. **Which of the following statements is false?**
 - A. If you feel hurt by your ex, your children may or may not feel the same way
 - B. Parents should be aware that children pick up on nonverbal cues and behavior
 - C. Getting support for yourself is less important than supporting your children
 - D. Parents and children often feel very differently about divorce

6. **Parenting plans should be:**
 - A. Well-thought out and adhered to whenever possible
 - B. Flexible enough to include occasional changes
 - C. Updated when appropriate to meet the changing needs of your family
 - D. All of the above

CHAPTER 5

Developmental Stages: Responding to Your Child's Individual Needs

How to Speak Your Child's Developmentally Appropriate Language

All family members are affected by the transitions associated with divorce. Being aware of your children's individual needs will make it easier for you to make healthy decisions for them. While responses vary with age, and some issues are unique to only certain age groups, many children experience sadness, anger, anxiety, fear, rejection, and loneliness. There is no definitive evidence that divorce is easier or more difficult on one age group than another. It is also important to remember that your child will experience the divorce differently throughout the course of their life. Even though your child might be very intelligent, and seemingly able to understand everything, this understanding will grow deeper as your child matures.

Communicate with your children about the divorce. To do this, you must be at least somewhat comfortable talking about these issues. Or, as an alternative, you can be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. It might be difficult for your children to see you struggling emotionally, but it is a valuable life lesson for them to see you deal with difficult issues and recover from them. You should speak with your children at their appropriate age levels (see the reference list for some excellent books on how to do this). With all children, your communications should include ample doses of love and affirmation. Encourage your children to ask questions, and allow them to express emotions. By allowing your children to express their concerns and feelings, you are keeping the lines of communication open and teaching them coping strategies. At first, it might be difficult to witness your child's emotional reactions. It is important for you to not overreact to what they are feeling. Let them know it is OK to feel that way, and that feelings are temporary and likely to change. Now, let's take a closer look at how kids of different ages are affected by divorce.

What reactions should I expect from my infant or toddler?

Infants and toddlers need consistency in their contact with parents. Unpredictable daily routines, hostility between parents, or frequent exposure to emotional upset are central sources of psychological stress. Infants distressed by major changes in their routine may exhibit sleeping or eating/digestive problems, or excessive crying.

Toddlers (18-24 months) are challenged differently than infants. While they are working on the developmental achievements of separation and individuation, they still have many dependency needs. Toddlers are also dealing with security issues when they are apart from their parents. A parent's partial or complete disappearance can be a frightening experience. Toddlers may exhibit many of the same symptoms as infants; it is also common for toddlers to show heightened irritability, aggression, lethargy, temper tantrums, night terrors, and regression, including the loss of previously acquired toilet-training skills. Heightened separation anxiety from either parent is another common symptom at this age.

How can I best assist my infant or toddler?

Whenever and wherever possible, create stability. Infants and toddlers need a stable environment and regular schedules. Under most circumstances, frequent contact with both parents is best. Infants have a limited memory, but it is recommended that the nonresident parent spend at least a few hours with an infant every two or three days. These visits should be characterized by lots of cuddling, talking, storytelling, and playing. This type of regular interaction, coupled with paying attention to a child's individual needs, helps create a healthy and secure environment.

Like infants, toddlers thrive on schedule and routine, and they enjoy a lot of parental contact. When it comes to visitation, toddlers also thrive best with a regular schedule that is comfortable for both parents. In some families, this will include daytime contact several times a week and regular telephone calls a few times a week. In other families, overnight stays with the non-resident parent can take place. Parents need to figure out what works best for their kids. Unless there are special or unusual circumstances, parents should be supportive of overnight stays with the nonresident parent. Remember to make time for lots of cuddling, playing, fantasy, and make-believe.

What reactions should I expect from my preschooler?

Children in the three- to five-year-old range have limited ability to make sense of parental loss, and they may blame the divorce on themselves. They may believe that a parent's emotional distress or anger, and even the divorce, is their fault. Regression to earlier behaviors is common; for example, loss of developmental accomplishments in sleeping, eating, motor activity, language, toilet training, emotional independence, and social relationships. There may be excessive clinging or crying when a parent leaves to go to another part of the house, and transitions between homes are frequently difficult. Expressions of anger and temper tantrums are common in preschool children. It is important for parents to see these reactions as normal and appropriate given the situation. Most of these setbacks and problem behaviors will diminish in time.

How can I best assist my preschooler?

Keep in mind that most children this age have some separation anxiety, whether their parents are getting divorced or not. A separation or divorce might intensify that anxiety. Children accustomed to having both parents at home can become anxious at the thought of one parent moving out. Reassure children that the change means that they will have two homes now. Take them to the new home (both parents together, if possible) and show them where Mom or Dad will be staying. The more comfortable you are with separating physically, the more comfortable your child will be.

Preschoolers thrive on consistent and stable routines. Contact with both parents should be conflict free and predictable. Regular and frequent visitation by the nonresident parent is also important. You will find that your efforts at providing a stable routine for your preschooler will pay off. It will help them feel secure. In addition, regular contact with the nonresident parent will help minimize or eliminate any feelings of

rejection. Parents can reduce their child's stress by maintaining a daily routine, eliminating open conflict, and gaining emotional stability for themselves. Avoid speaking negatively about the absent parent and focus more on giving your child permission to stay connected with the absent parent. Telephone contact between parents and children should be encouraged.

It is very important to reassure your young children that the divorce is not their fault. Relationships, you should explain, are very complicated, and sometimes they end before people expect them to. Just as their behavior did not cause the divorce, they should be reminded that it is not their responsibility to keep their parents together. You can also remind them that you will always be a family, and that both parents will always love and care for them. Children this age will understand these ideas to varying degrees. As they get older, it will still be important for children to hear this, but they will understand it differently.

What reactions should I expect from my six- to eight-year-old child?

Early elementary-age school children are developing feelings of competence and mastery. Children undergoing a divorce at this age may also regress and show less initiative or willingness to use previously acquired skills. They may exhibit anxiety, restlessness, increased moodiness, tantrums, or separation problems. Signs of sadness, stress, or depression may take the form of physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach problems, and tiredness. You might also see a withdrawal from peers and pleasurable activities, a refusal to do homework or go to school, and changes in bedtime routine, among others. These symptoms are often a child's attempt to get reassurance or increased contact with parents.

Young children will often struggle to be loyal to both parents. This struggle might be expressed in many ways; it may take the form of trying to over please parents and be perfect. On the other hand, it might be expressed through anger toward one or both parents. Keep in mind that a range of reactions is possible. You will probably be challenged by your children's reactions because you don't want to see them hurt, which will increase your own stress level. Remind yourself that these responses are normal, and in time you should see a great improvement. Allow yourself to notice times when your child is coping well with the situation. Let them know you notice their efforts and are proud of them.

How can I best assist my six- to eight-year-old child?

The foremost protective factor for young children (all children!) is to minimize parental conflict, especially when children are present. Children openly exposed to such conflict, whether overt or subtle, tend to have poorer psychological adjustment to the divorce. Second, divorcing parents need to provide warmth and emotional support, adequate monitoring, authoritative discipline, and age-appropriate expectations. Younger children who receive these protective factors adjust far better than children whose parents are inattentive or less supportive, or use coercive discipline. Lastly, significant contact with both parents following a divorce is crucial. Several studies have found that children who maintain close relationships with both parents have more positive adjustment and better academic performance after divorce than those who do not.

Other important practices include keeping routines consistent, maintaining friendships and connections with significant relatives, and speaking with your child's teachers. Make teachers aware of the transitions going on with your child, and ask them to be prompt in discussing any of their concerns with you.

What reactions should I expect from my nine- to twelve-year-old child?

Elementary-school children feel extreme loss when a divorce occurs, but it is not impossible for parents to rebuild a child's sense of security. Keep the lines of communication open, but don't press your children to express their feelings if they are not ready to. Older elementary-school children may experience divided loyalties, which can be especially painful if one or both parents attempt to enlist the child "on their side" in an adversarial divorce process. These children frequently convert painful feelings of loss, helplessness, and sadness into anger, which is more tolerable to them than emotional vulnerability. Low self-esteem and decreased academic performance are also common.

Anger directed at one or both parents is not uncommon. Children may take on the belief system of the parent they feel is being treated unfairly (usually the one who was more hurt). An alliance with one parent can be comforting to that parent, but it is not a healthy situation. Parents should not encourage such alliances, no matter how vindicated it makes them feel. Doing so can help foster feelings of guilt when the child is older.

Also common at this age are changes in the amount of time spent with peers. You might see an increase in time your child spends with friends or a sharp decline in peer interactions. Both can be normal, and you should make room for either reaction. At the same time, be aware of behavior at either extreme. Not uncommon is for children this age to fantasize about parents getting back together. Look for opportunities to discuss gently and respectfully the reality of this hope.

Look for signs that your child may be over-functioning. Some children this age try to act perfectly so as not to disappoint their parents. They live with the idea that if they behave perfectly, their parents will not get divorced. At the other extreme are children who begin to regress into behaviors they had long since abandoned. Again, you should be prepared for both possibilities and make room for either if they occur.

Physical complaints parents should be aware of include headaches, stomachaches, changes in sleeping habits, and appetite changes, among others. Most of these physical complaints should ebb in time. If you notice them for extended periods (longer than 2 months) you should consult your family physician or a mental-health professional.

How can I best assist my 9- to 12-year old?

It is best to communicate clear and consistent expectations to your child. Let them know that their feelings are valid, but how they express them is important. For example, let them know that their anger is normal,

and offer them positive alternatives for expressing it. There should be consequences for bad or inappropriate behavior, and parents should not feel guilty about disciplining their child. Take physical complaints seriously, however; remember that a child's reaction to stress is often manifested through a physical complaint. Whenever possible, keep your children involved in healthy activities including sports, clubs, or creative outlets. Remember to support their interests, and make what is important to them important to you. Both parents should be involved in a child's extracurricular activities. Children will sense and react to a parent who is too busy to spend time with them, and this is one of many ways to show that you are concerned and involved.

What reactions should I expect from my adolescent?

Adolescence is a period of substantial flux on all developmental fronts. Teenagers are dealing with their emerging sexuality, solidifying their identity, coping with peer pressure, and moving toward increased autonomy. When parents divorce, adolescents must deal with these developmental issues as well as adjust to the changes associated with the divorce. While some teens fare well as they face the challenges of a divorce, others exhibit moderate to severe emotional distress. This distress will most likely be manifested in most or all areas of a teen's life.

In addition, adolescents are capable of expressing their distress about the divorce in alarming new ways. Teenagers can exhibit intense anger, abuse illicit drugs or alcohol, engage in sexual activities, physically hurt themselves, run away, or get in trouble with the law. They may also strongly align themselves with one parent. Dealing with parental dating or remarriage can be especially difficult for children in this age group and may elicit strong emotional reactions from your teen.

How can I best assist my adolescent?

More than ever, teens experiencing a divorce need emotional support, love, and firm guidance from their parents. When challenges do arise, parents need to distinguish between a normal adolescent response, a typical reaction to divorce, and something deeper and more serious. For example, many parents need to differentiate between normal mood swings and the anger and depression associated with the stresses of divorce. This is easier said than done. Teenagers' depressed feelings can mirror classic symptoms of depression. Trouble sleeping, sleeping too much, poor concentration, low energy or fatigue, feelings of hopelessness, and depressed mood are all possibilities. You might also see increased irritability, withdrawal from friends or family members, suicidal thoughts, fighting, and highly dangerous acting-out behaviors such as self-cutting. If you have any doubts that the anger or depression that your adolescent is feeling goes beyond what might be considered normal given the situation, you should immediately consult a mental-health professional to get another opinion.

Encourage your teenager to communicate without pressing them to do so. Show respect for their boundaries, but be on the lookout for opportunities when they want to talk. It is not uncommon to hear a response of "fine" to all of your inquiries about how they are doing. This is typical, as many teenagers will not want to discuss the divorce or their feelings. Let them know this is OK, while occasionally reminding

them that you are willing to talk when they are. Giving them permission not to talk about their feelings also gives them room to talk with you when they are ready. Reassuring and approving of their unique and individual responses is vital during this transition time.

As with other age groups, consistency around rules and expectations is vital. At the same time, you should be flexible when necessary. Remember to support your teen in whatever hobbies, interests, or activities they are involved in. Many adolescents deal with a divorce by distancing from family members and immersing themselves in an outside activity. If this is the case, you should look for help from extended family members, teachers, coaches, and anyone else in the community who can be of help. Keep in mind that most teenagers reconnect with their family once the transitions associated with the divorce become more familiar.

Most experts agree that an important way of empowering teens is to involve them in decisions regarding living arrangements, school, and visitation, where appropriate. This will give them a sense of control and help them feel like part of the process, instead of totally removed from important decisions affecting them. In addition, remind yourself that there will be ups and downs during the process, but that teens can cope successfully with their parents' divorce and the changes it brings. You may even discover some unexpected positives. Many teens find their parents are actually happier after the divorce, or they may develop new and better ways of relating to both parents when they have separate time with each one.

Some teens become more compassionate and kind when a younger brother or sister needs their support and care. Siblings who are closer in age may form tighter bonds, learning to count on each other more because they're facing the challenges of their parents' divorce together. Coping well with divorce also can bring out strength and maturity in teens. They may become more responsible, independent, and thoughtful. Some become better problem solvers, better listeners, or better friends.

Most teens learn—sometimes to their surprise—that they can make it through this difficult situation successfully. Giving it time, letting others support them along the way, and keeping an eye on the good things in life can make all the difference.

When should I consult a professional?

When a child or teen shows significant signs of distress, or when some of the symptoms we have been talking about become chronic or extreme, you may want to consult a mental-health professional. Marriage and family therapists are typically the most qualified through their extensive training in dealing with families in transition. A qualified therapist can provide a safe place for children to express their feelings, to understand the changes happening in their lives, and to develop coping strategies. Therapists can also raise parents' awareness of the post-divorce dynamics that hamper children's positive adjustment. When possible, both parents should be involved in the counseling. Some parents report not wanting to be in the same room with their co-parent. Remember, this is about your children and doing what is best for them. To locate a qualified therapist, visit www.aamft.org

A note about staying together for the kids

Often, high conflict couples—and chances are you know at least one or two—stay married for their children's sake. While this is very noble, most experts now agree that it is far better to provide a conflict-free environment for your children than to stay married. Children who come from low-stress and low-conflict homes are more equipped to face life's challenges. They exhibit fewer behavior problems, are less likely to experiment with drugs or alcohol, and overall show more promise than children who come from high-conflict homes. Although these are generalities, it's worth working on providing a low-stress and positive family home environment for yourself and your children.

Checklist for identifying and handling challenging behaviors

- ✓ Encourage talking about the divorce, but do not pressure kids to open up.
- ✓ Be consistent with consequences when rules are broken (avoid physical punishment and name-calling).
- ✓ Ask yourself whether a problem behavior is typical for your child's age.
- ✓ Identify times when your children are behaving well and tell them so.
- ✓ Make room for angry and sad feelings, realizing this is normal and temporary.
- ✓ Provide kids with age-appropriate activities and hobbies.
- ✓ Teach children to leave a situation if they are losing control.
- ✓ Realize there is a connection between conflict with your spouse and your child's acting out.
- ✓ Realize that most challenges and behavior problems will be temporary.
- ✓ Seek outside help when problem behaviors are chronic, dangerous, or extreme.

The Gift of Grieving

Dealing with grief is an important part of moving on from a divorce. Grief is defined as the conflicting feelings caused by a change in or an end to a familiar pattern of behavior. Not surprisingly, children's experiences of grief will vary depending on their age and individual circumstances. Some divorces precipitate a grief response that is mild and transient, while others threaten the foundation of a child's world. Young children express grief in vastly different ways from teens and adults.

Although the grieving process can be difficult, it is ultimately a healing process. Becoming aware of the stages of grief and working through them ultimately helps us resolve difficult issues and move on. Below are general stages of grief, along with some of the ways children of different ages and adults deal with grief. Keep in mind that moving through various stages of grief is a normal way for children to deal with loss. These stages may vary in order, occur simultaneously, or recur after progress into the next stage. Although painful and difficult, the end result is healing, which ultimately leads to growth.

The Stages of Children's Grief

Disorganization: The initial expressions of grief in children range from regression, temper tantrums, and exaggerated fears in younger children to physical symptoms, lack of concentration, and mood swings in

older children. The disorganization of early grief is a true crisis for children, but parents and loved ones can help a child through this stage.

Transition: Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair follow the stress and chaotic behaviors of the disorganization stage. Many children will exhibit signs of depression. More common are withdrawal, aggression, and difficulty in school.

Reorganization: When painful feelings are expressed, their emotional energy wanes, and detachment becomes possible. During this stage, children have more energy and motivation for moving forward to a positive resolution of their grief.

Though children's grief follows this progression, it is complicated by the circular nature of grief. If you've experienced grief in your life, you know this to be true. Just when you have moved forward in your resolution of grief, some reminder of the loss floods you with emotions that bring you right back to feelings of despair and great sorrow. Adults can recognize and understand what is happening with their emotions; children often cannot. Parents must recognize the circular nature of grieving in order to help their children through difficult times during their development.

The final consideration in helping children successfully manage the grieving process is the developmental age of the child. It is important to note that a grieving child's developmental age may lag behind his chronological age. Regression is expected, and developmental accomplishments take longer to achieve.

How Preschoolers Express Grief

- Bedwetting
- Thumb sucking
- Clinging to adults
- Exaggerated fears
- Excessive crying
- Temper tantrums
- Regression
- Stubbornness

Helping the Grieving Preschooler

- Answer the child's question honestly and simply; allow them to talk about the loss; help them share their fears and worries.
- Provide simple routines.
- Give the child affection and nurturing; attempt to connect.
- Provide more opportunities for play.
- Be patient with regressive behaviors such as thumb-sucking.
- Provide opportunities for the expression of painful emotions through play, creative outlets, and talk. Teach them to recognize and name their full range of feelings.

How Elementary-School-Age Children Express Grief

- School and learning problems
- Preoccupation with the loss and related worries; daydreaming; trouble paying attention
- Bedwetting; regression; developmental delays
- Eating and sleeping problems (overeating, refusing to eat, nightmares, sleepiness)
- Fighting, anger

Helping the Grieving Elementary-School-Age Child

- Keep tasks simple. Explain things before they experience them: new neighborhood, school, church, family routines, and changes.
- Provide a structured environment that is predictable and consistent; limit choices; introduce small, manageable choices over time.
- Contain acting-out behavior; insist that children express their wants, needs, and feelings with words, not by acting out.
- Encourage them to let you know when they are worried or having a difficult time.

How Pre-Teens and Early Adolescents Express Grief

- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping and eating disorders, hypochondria), wide mood swings
- Able to verbally express emotions
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Increase in risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors
- Anger; aggression; fighting; contrary or combative behavior
- Withdrawal from adults or peers
- Depression; sadness
- Lack of concentration and attention
- Identity confusion; testing limits

Helping the Grieving Pre-Teen and Early Adolescent

- Accept that they will experience mood swings and physical symptoms.
- Encourage them to honestly recognize their painful feelings and find positive outlets in physical and creative activities.
- Listen for the feelings behind their words and actions, and respond with empathy.
- Be truthful and factual in explaining the loss.
- Help them develop and maintain their sense of identity.
- Allow pre-teens to make choices that are not harmful. Encourage safe expressions and experiences of beginning independence.

The Adult Grieving Process

Adults have a different grieving process. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross outlined a model for dealing with death and dying that has been applied to the adult grieving process. Knowing these stages can be useful for understanding how your own grieving process might proceed and will allow you to track your progress.

Remember that everyone's grief journey is unique, and there is no specific time-frame for it. Although grief is different for each individual, finding a way through it successfully requires some knowledge and understanding of the grief experience and the work of mourning. The initial reaction to a traumatic event is *shock*—an inability or unwillingness to believe what is happening. After the initial shock, most people proceed through all or some of the following five stages:

1. **Denial:** Denial is a common first response that adults experience because they need to believe in the stability of their lives.
2. **Anger:** People experiencing anger want to lash out and blame someone for how they feel. They often appear irritable, aggressive, and uncooperative.
3. **Bargaining:** In this stage, parents might believe they can save their relationship if they do certain things or make special promises. The bargaining stage allows people to feel they have some control over the situation. In the bargaining stage, parents can focus on hope and thereby delay facing sadness: "If I do this or that, I can save our marriage."
4. **Depression:** Depression involves a great sense of loss and sadness upon realizing that nothing will stop the divorce. People need to acknowledge and express their feelings of loss and sadness. Denying or repressing these feelings only leads to them resurfacing in destructive ways. On the other hand, making room for these feelings decreases their intensity and duration.
5. **Acceptance:** Acceptance means seeing the reality before you and moving beyond the feelings of loss. It begins when there is less depression, more resolution and stability, and people accept the divorce. Acceptance appears gradually and may take months or years to occur. Divorce is a major transition and a journey of growth. There are no absolute rules that determine how the process of healing will occur. Your ability to adapt to divorce will depend on a lot of factors. One thing is for sure: the sooner you begin to heal, the sooner your children will be on their road to recovery.

Chapter 5 Review Questions

- 1. The short-term aftermath stage:**
 - A. Usually lasts about 90 days
 - B. Can last up to two years
 - C. Is most difficult on adolescents
 - D. Discourages co-parenting
- 2. Which of the following is NOT a common symptom associated with an infant or toddler's response to divorce?**
 - A. Lethargy
 - B. Temper tantrums
 - C. Strained peer relationships
 - D. Night terrors
- 3. Which age group is working on developing feelings of competence and mastery?**
 - A. Adolescents
 - B. Toddlers
 - C. Elementary-school age
 - D. None of the above
- 4. Which of the following statements about separation anxiety and preschoolers is correct?**
 - A. It is very uncommon, so don't worry about it
 - B. It will probably continue into adolescence
 - C. It is more common in boys than girls
 - D. The more comfortable you are with separating, the more comfortable your child will be
- 5. Which of the following statements about nine- to twelve-year-olds is false?**
 - A. An increase or decline in peer relationships is normal
 - B. They sometimes will create alliances with one parent
 - C. They are old enough to be in on adult decisions
 - D. Physical complaints are not uncommon
- 6. One of the biggest challenges when dealing with an adolescent around issues of divorce is:**
 - A. Ensuring that they communicate their feelings
 - B. Knowing which behaviors are developmentally appropriate and which are more serious
 - C. Easing up on structure and discipline
 - D. All of the above
- 7. Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair are characteristic of which stage of the grieving process in children?**
 - A. Disorganization
 - B. Transition
 - C. Reorganization
 - D. None of the above

CHAPTER 6

Communication: The Key to a Healthy Divorce Experience

It should be no surprise that an important key to ensuring your children's well-being through a divorce is communication. However, too much or too little too communication can be problematic. Recall previously that we recommend that parents together have the initial conversation about separating and divorce with their children. Both parents should be available whenever children feel the need to discuss the divorce. Depending on your child's age, you might hear the same questions over and over again. It is important that you remain patient and know that your child is looking to you for stability. Your answers should be consistent, although you are not expected to know the answers to every question; it is certainly okay to let your children know that. Try to refrain from speaking with your children regarding the practical aspects of their living situation when you are very upset. They need to feel secure in the knowledge that they will be safe, so their questions on these topics are best addressed when you can focus on their needs and provide the reassurance they're seeking.

Another common trap for parents in divorce is over-explaining. It's easy to believe that children should have complete knowledge of every aspect of the parents' relationship and divorce, so frequently, parents who are hurt or who oppose the divorce will begin a habit of over-explaining. In general, you should keep explanations to your small children (between 2 and 5 years old) relatively brief. As above, a child's primary need at this stage is reassurance. They need to know that their immediate needs will be met and that both parents love them. At the same time, remember that children are very resilient and can adapt to many changes; children are often more adaptable than adults. Do not assume that your difficulty in adjusting to the divorce will necessarily mean your child's difficulty as well.

Older children (between 6 and 10 years old) tend to ask the same questions over and over again. Depending on the child, you might be very surprised at the level of sophistication in their concerns. Reassurance at this stage is also very important. In addition to the care and concern of both parents, let children know about the areas of life that will remain stable. Your child will be looking to you for cues about how to feel about the situation. It is perfectly appropriate for your children to see you emotional, but they should also experience you discussing the divorce in a calm and rational manner. They will learn it is acceptable to have emotions and express feelings appropriately. Divorce itself is not as problematic for children as the divorcing process, and how parents treat one another is what can adversely affect kids.

Pre-teens and adolescents also need a certain amount of assurance. Although they will likely say that everything is "fine," they will also appreciate the reassurance their parents will be involved in their lives and that certain routines and living situations will remain stable. Pre-teens are more attuned than younger children to relationships, so your respect and consideration for the other parent will be very visible. They are also more attuned to subtle gestures like rolling of the eyes, tone of voice, and overall attitude, so be mindful of these as you communicate with your co-parent.

One positive way to communicate with children of all ages is by spending time with them. Making time for each of your children every day (and individually if possible) will speak volumes about what is important to you. Rarely has a parent regretted spending too much time with their children, getting down to their level, and experiencing life with them.

Should I cry in front of my children?

You should not be afraid to show emotions around your children. Seeing you be work through your emotions will let them know that having difficult feelings and expressing pain are not negative things. You will be teaching them to respect their emotions and to express them in appropriate ways. Parents often feel ashamed when children are there to comfort them. In moderation, this is certainly not harmful for your child, and it can also be quite empowering. The thing to remember is that if you are overwhelmed with emotions on a regular basis, you need to find other outlets for them away from your children. You will want the times you react rationally and logically around your children to outweigh the times you react emotionally.

How do I respond to my children's emotional reactions?

Expect that your children will have emotional responses. These are opportunities for you to validate sad, angry, or anxious feelings. Listen for the emotion behind what your child is saying and respond to the emotion, rather than the content. For example, if your child is expressing reluctance to sleep in a new home, you can say: "It sounds like you are nervous about staying in the new home tonight." Letting them respond gives them an opportunity to talk about the feeling of nervousness. At this point, whatever they say should be followed up with a question like: "What specifically makes you nervous?" "What does that feel like?" In addition to allowing them to talk about these feelings, you will be gathering information about how to provide some reassurance. Avoid negating these feelings or saying anything like they are being silly, stupid, babyish, or any other put-down. Each of these forms of dismissal tells your child that his or her feelings are not okay. On the other hand, asking questions about the feelings and giving permission for those feelings to exist will teach your child a great deal about exploring emotions and expressing them constructively.

How do I balance doing what my children want and doing what is best for them?

The key here is balance. Be on the lookout for times when you can offer your child choices. This habit will empower them and show them their ideas and opinions count. At the same time, you don't have to feel like all decisions have to be approved by the children. Get used to the idea that you will be making decisions for your children that they will not like or agree with. This is a good thing. Although children may express some negative feelings about some of your decisions, they will ultimately feel a sense of security that you are making such decisions and taking control. Don't be afraid of your child's emotional reactions; make room for them, discuss them, and they will pass.

Remember to tell your children verbally that you love them. They should also experience this love through your words and your actions. Stay involved with what is important to them, including their hobbies and extracurricular activities. Let them know that friends who are important to them are also important to you.

Open communication should be encouraged but not forced. Your children should feel that even when you have a disagreement with them, you are interested in their opinions and perspectives. You can validate your child's opinion without agreeing with it. Fourteen year-old daughter: "Daddy, I want to stay up until eleven o'clock tonight; there is a movie I want to watch." Parent: "I understand that you really want to see this movie and it is important to you. But tonight is a school night, and your bedtime is ten p.m." Even though your child might be angry with your decision and may disagree with it, you are letting them know that you understand their perspective, and this will be validating even though they are not getting their way.

Overwhelmingly, a major challenge parents face is the temptation to slack off discipline and to provide their child whatever material things they ask for. This is common enough for parents who are married, but even more common among those who are divorced. Many such parents feel their children have suffered because of the divorce and therefore should get whatever they ask for. This is a big mistake. It's difficult to resist the urge to give in to guilt about getting divorced; however, the only thing children learn by always getting what they want is that they can manipulate people. Far too many parents wish they had never begun giving in to their children's every whim.

A related issue arises when you are making good choices for your kids, but your co-parent is spoiling them by giving them everything they want and not enforcing discipline or structure. This is an unfortunate circumstance, but there is usually little you can do about it. If you are lucky enough to have a relationship with your co-parent where you give and receive feedback from one another, then by all means you can point out areas for improvement. More likely, however, is a situation where parents will not feel comfortable giving and taking such advice. You should go on enforcing rules, structure, and a respectful, safe atmosphere in your home and hope your co-parent realizes that a lack of structure and spoiling are very destructive. By now you should be expecting the next five words: keep doing the right thing.

How should we handle issues that arise around visitation?

If your child complains, becomes sad, or throws a tantrum every time they are to visit the other parent, it is important that you see this reaction for what it is. Children will often have such reactions in front of you because they feel it is the response you want to see from them. Frequently, when they are with the other parent, they are fine and thriving. It is important to be firm about the importance of visiting and spending time with the other parent. Your children might see you as the "enemy" by forcing them to go, but it is the right thing to do. The rare exception would be if you had a genuine belief that your child would be abused or neglected by the other parent or another person in the other parent's household. In these situations, it is your responsibility to ensure your child's safety. Otherwise, you should calmly and unemotionally let

your children know that visitation with the other parent is mandatory. This becomes more challenging with teenagers who feel they are old enough to make their own decisions regarding visitation.

If you are the parent your child is reluctant to visit, your challenge will be different. First off, show some understanding for your co-parent who is dealing with a child who says they do not want to visit you. Also, recognize that your child is probably responding more to a stressful situation and less to who you are as a parent. If your child is saying they do not want to visit or spend time with you, you might need to ask yourself some uncomfortable questions: How are we spending our visitation time? Am I available to my children during visitation? Am I taking time to listen to them and participate in their lives? Do I look forward to visitation and the time that I spend with my children? If after taking an honest inventory of yourself as a parent, you feel you are providing a very safe, structured, and loving, environment, then you should assume that your child is reacting to the situation and not take personally their reluctance to visit with you. You might have to make some short-term accommodations to their wishes while letting them know that visitation with you is required. The key here is not to get caught up in your child's emotional response, but to deal with them and your co-parent with reason, flexibility, and loving concern.

When your child returns from a visit with Mom or Dad, do not grill them for information. It's helpful to demonstrate a healthy sense of curiosity about the time they spend together, but do not ask interrogating questions. You should be excited for them if they are excited about the time they spent, and be available to listen when there are issues that arise. If your child expresses some concerns about something that occurred during a visit, you should let them know that you will discuss the issue with the other parent at the appropriate time. When engaging your co-parent regarding a problem during visitation, avoid blaming or attacking the other parent. Instead, hear their telling of the incident by asking curious, non-blaming questions. Remember that there are two sides to every story, and continually siding with your child against the other parent will merely foster angry and resentful feelings.

Checklist for healthy communication and a positive divorce experience

- ✓ Am I fostering open communication with my children?
- ✓ Am I supporting my child's relationship with both parents?
- ✓ Am I communicating with my child in age-appropriate ways?
- ✓ Am I refraining from:
 - Using my children to communicate with the other parent?
 - Getting caught up in my child's emotional response?
 - Grilling them when they return from visitation?
 - Spoiling children and letting them always get their way?
- ✓ Am I encouraging my child's hobbies, interests, and routines?
- ✓ Am I supporting communication about the divorce but not forcing it?
- ✓ Am I providing consistent discipline and consequences for inappropriate behavior?

- ✓ Do I make room for the other parent's parenting style even if I disagree with it sometimes?
- ✓ Am I seeking assistance for problems that have become unmanageable?

Positive traits children can develop through a healthy divorce experience

1. **Ability to deal with change:** Children of divorced parents often learn to adapt to changing circumstances more quickly than other children. This often reinforces a sense of inner strength and resilience.
2. **Skill in expressing feelings:** Throughout the divorce process, children often have to deal with a wide range of emotions. This can facilitate recognition of different feelings and ways to express them that are healthy.
3. **Greater sense of independence:** Children of divorce often become more responsible for themselves and their siblings at an earlier age.
4. **Willingness to seek help:** Children of divorce may have a more realistic sense of their abilities and weaknesses and may be more willing to seek assistance when needed.
5. **Openness to diversity:** Children whose parents have divorced are often exposed to a wider range of diversity and lifestyles. This exposure can be beneficial in a variety of ways and contribute to long-term adjustment in many of life's challenging situations.

Chapter 6 Review Questions

1. **Regarding communication, parents should:**
 - A. Communicate about the divorce as much as possible
 - B. Not talk about the divorce with children
 - C. Be open to communicating about the divorce but not force it
 - D. Communicate only with older children

2. **A common mistake parents make when communicating with their children is:**
 - A. Over-explaining
 - B. Supporting outside interests
 - C. Managing their emotions
 - D. All of the above

3. **When dealing with their own emotions, parents should:**
 - A. Hide what they are actually feeling
 - B. Always share their difficult feelings with their children
 - C. Find appropriate outlets to manage difficult emotions
 - D. All of the above

4. **When your child expresses an intense negative emotion, you should:**
 - A. Tell them such responses are unacceptable
 - B. Make attempts to understand these emotions
 - C. Match their emotion in intensity
 - D. Provide an appropriate punishment

5. **Parents can show that they love their children by:**
 - A. Telling them
 - B. Not putting them in the middle of adult issues
 - C. Being interested and involved in their extracurricular activities
 - D. All of the above

6. **Regarding visitation, parents should:**
 - A. Ask children a lot of questions to show your interest
 - B. Not force children to visit the other parent if they don't want to
 - C. Give in to their children's emotional responses
 - D. Honestly evaluate their own parenting styles and home situations if their children are reluctant to visit

CHAPTER 7

Families in Transition: Dating & Step-family Issues

When should I begin dating, and how do I tell my children?

We continually stress the importance of taking care of yourself as a means of taking care of your children. Making new friends and starting to date are very personal decisions. Parents will need to trust that enough time has gone by to begin integrating new people into your children's lives. Feedback from close friends or family members can be particularly helpful at this time. Many people rush into a new relationship because they don't want to deal with feelings of abandonment or loneliness. People who rush into new relationships tend to have the same problems in these new relationships. You should work through these issues on your own or with a qualified mental-health professional before entering into another serious relationship. You will be in a much better place to make good decisions for yourself and for your children. As hard as it can be (especially if your ex is in a relationship), spending time alone and working on yourself can be the best thing for yourself and your children.

When you are ready to begin dating, introduce the idea to your children (in age-appropriate ways) well beforehand. Let them get used to the idea that you will be seeing other people. In the beginning, meet new dates away from your home. Limit the number of people who spend time with the children, providing them with consistent and responsible role models whenever possible. Make room for a variety of reactions from your children. Often, children are ready for their parents to begin dating before the parents are. At the other extreme are children who are angry that their parents are dating. Reinforce to your children that they come first, and that you are not trying to replace their mom or dad.

You should introduce your children to someone you are dating after you have gotten to know that person on your own. Ask yourself whether this is a person who will have a positive impact on your children. Ideally, you should only introduce those people who are becoming a significant part of your life. Begin with a few short outings, and focus on things that are fun for your children. Remember that initial reactions are just that, and your child will likely have a different experience as time goes on.

How do I introduce to my children the idea of a step-family and getting remarried?

Step-families have many rewards. However, couples who have children from a previous marriage or relationship may not have an easy adjustment to re-married life. There is no honeymoon period, and the first two years are usually the most difficult. Nonetheless, there are several things parents can do to ease the transitions:

Take it Slow

- There is no such thing as "instant love"; love and relationships take time to develop. You and your new partner have chosen each other, but the children may not even want a new step-family.

- One of the biggest mistakes step-parents make is trying too hard. Be yourself and be patient. Let your new partner get to know your children gradually. Be willing to accept any response that the children have initially.

Friendship, Not Discipline

- For the first several years as a step-family, a step-parent should concentrate on playing a warm and supportive role. Think about what this might be: coach, mentor, or friend. A step-parent should support you as the child's biological parent, but leave the discipline role initially to you. In time, a step-parent can begin to enforce consequences and initiate discipline when appropriate.
- Be aware that a step-parent's role will develop according to the age of the children involved. Toddlers will more quickly accept a step-parent in a parental role than will a teenager who is usually not interested in having another parent telling them what to do. You will be more successful with a teenager if you take on a coach or friendship role instead.

Keep Your Couple Relationship Happy

- As busy as your lives are, take time to be alone with your partner, because a strong, caring, and respectful couple relationship is key to the success of the family.
- You and your partner may have very different ideas about parenting. Read books or take a parenting course together to become familiar with new ideas. Find time for private discussions about how the children in your new step-family should be raised. You need to talk about how your household will operate. Remember that you need not agree on everything. What is important is that you discuss these issues, respect the other's opinions, and compromise.

Respect Parent/Child Bonds

- Children and their biological parents need to spend time alone. Although this may make you feel jealous at times, it is important to respect the bond between your partner and his or her children. The more secure the children feel in their relationship with their parent, the more likely they are to be open to an improving relationship with their step-parent.
- You cannot replace their absent parent, nor can you compete with them. Simply be yourself, and concentrate on developing your own unique relationship with them. Remember not to take negative behaviors or attitudes too seriously or personally. These are normal reactions for children, and the more you make room for them, the sooner they will disappear.
- Encourage your children's relationships with their other parent. Some parents fantasize that life would be wonderful if the other parent were not part of their children's lives. Most studies indicate that children need both parents in life. Even in situations where parents cannot imagine the other parent giving their child anything positive, there are usually some valuable qualities or experiences that will be helpful to your children. Protecting the relationship with your child's mother or father will make it easier for them to accept a step-parent. A step-parent can be a positive role model and a wonderful influence on your child, but should not be seen as a replacement for a biological parent.

Respect History

Step-parents enter a family that already has a way of doing things—an established history of traditions that affect everything from who takes out the garbage to how people behave at mealtimes. As the newcomer, it is important that the step-parent watch and learn the family's traditions without being critical or trying to change them overnight. Over time, as a step-family, you will develop your own traditions together.

Where do I turn for help?

Before marriage, new couples should look for a marriage-preparation program that focuses specifically on couples who will be forming a step-family. Another alternative is to contact a family-service agency, many of which run step-family support groups and may offer workshops on building successful step-families.

Many step-families find that establishing a relationship with a family counselor is time and money well spent. An initial meeting is suggested before everyone moves in together, affording an opportunity to talk about what kinds of roles and responsibilities would be acceptable to everyone. Later, the counselor can be used as a mediator to help family members sort out various issues.

Tips for Step-fathers

- Build a friendship with your step-child before attempting discipline. Be patient. Research shows it can take up to two years before the child will be comfortable with your discipline.
- Work as a team with your new partner to establish new house rules and methods of discipline.
- If you feel the biological mom is being unreasonable with her child, take the side of your step-child. This will begin to build some trust between you and the child.
- Take part in family meetings, and be open for suggestions from the children on chores and special tasks that need to be done.
- Talk to your spouse in private if you feel undermined or left out.
- Respect each other's privacy. Knock on doors before entering. Be an example of respect and courtesy.

Tips for Step-mothers

- Accept your role of step-mother, and don't try to become the mother.
- Understand that relationships take time to develop. Love for your stepchildren will not happen overnight. Work on liking them first. Look for the good in them, and respect their privacy.
- Avoid the blame game. You are not responsible for the misbehavior of your step-child. Seek understanding instead of blame.
- Make yourself available for your stepchildren. Do one-on-one activities with them to build rapport.
- Work as a team with your partner to build new house rules and traditions.
- Take care of yourself. Participate in your own activities and hobbies. The better you feel, the easier it is to accept and love others.

Chapter 7 Review Questions

1. **According to the chapter, many people rush into a new relationship because:**
 - A. They want to anger their ex
 - B. They want to replace the absent parent
 - C. They want to share expenses
 - D. They don't want to deal with feelings of abandonment and loneliness

2. **Which of the following statements regarding dating after divorce is true?**
 - A. Sometimes children are ready for their parents to be dating before the parents are ready
 - B. Children should meet everybody you date
 - C. Younger children should accompany parents on dates
 - D. All children feel the same about their parents dating

3. **A step-parent's role:**
 - A. Will always be difficult
 - B. Should vary depending on the child's age
 - C. Should never include any kind of discipline
 - D. All of the above

4. **If your child has a negative reaction upon meeting someone you are dating, you should:**
 - A. Stop seeing that person immediately
 - B. See the person more so your child will get used to them
 - C. Realize that this is only an initial reaction, and it will probably change
 - D. Make your child call that person either Mom or Dad

5. **A big mistake a step-parent can make is to:**
 - A. Expect too much too soon
 - B. Try really hard to be liked and respected
 - C. Take an immediate and active role in disciplining
 - D. All of the above

6. **Parents in step-families should:**
 - A. Seek the help of a family therapist or counselor when conflict becomes too intense
 - B. Avoid respecting each other's privacy
 - C. Never do one-on-one activities, because others will feel left out
 - D. Pay attention only to children who seem interested in developing a relationship with you

CHAPTER 8

Creating Safety: When Violence & Abuse Are Part of the Picture

Domestic Violence

What is the legal definition of domestic violence?

Domestic violence, child abuse, and child neglect are a feature of family life for many in the United States. For some, these events are unique to the period leading up to and during the separation or divorce. For others, a long history of violence, abuse or neglect convinces one or both parents that a separation or divorce is necessary. Physical violence, threats of violence, sexual assault, and child abuse are illegal. Specific definitions of domestic violence vary from state to state. But federal laws say it is illegal to injure—or threaten to injure—anyone related by blood or marriage, or with whom you are living together or are in an intimate relationship. This is true regardless of your cultural or religious heritage, citizenship status, or personal beliefs about discipline or the proper relationship between husbands and wives.

Domestic violence constitutes the willful intimidation, assault, battery, sexual assault, or other abusive behavior perpetrated by one family member, household member, or intimate partner against another. In most state laws addressing domestic violence, the relationship necessary for a charge of domestic assault or abuse generally includes a spouse, former spouse, persons currently residing together, or those who have resided together within the previous year, or persons who share a common child. In addition, as of 1997, a significant number of states have included dating relationships in their statutory definitions of domestic relationships. Victims of violence should understand that ignoring abuse will not make it stop. Abuse becomes more serious with time, and victims must realize that an abusive relationship is unhealthy and unsafe. Also, remember that a victim of domestic violence may be either male or female. Children can also be victims—physically, emotionally, or both (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2005).

The National Center for Victims of Crime (2005) describes the following behaviors as indicative of an abusive personality prone to domestic violence:

Intimidation: certain looks, gestures, or actions; smashing things; destruction of property or hurting pets; brandishing weapons.

Emotional Abuse: making the victim feel guilty; calling the victim names; embarrassing, humiliating, or demeaning the victim; playing mind games; telling the victim they are crazy; doing or saying things that make the victim feel that they **are** crazy.

Isolation keeping the victim from going places like visiting family or friends, attending social groups, etc.; listening to phone conversations or opening personal mail; following the victim around and/or questioning them about their whereabouts; using jealousy to justify actions.

Minimizing, denying, and blaming: making light of the abuse, saying it wasn't that bad; denying the abuse happened; saying the abuse was the victim's fault.

Excessive domination: acting like the master of the house; treating the victim like a servant; making all the big decisions; defining the victim's role/job; patronizing or in any other way treating the victim like a child, not as an equal adult.

Economic abuse: preventing the other parent from working outside the home; making them ask for money; limiting money; making them account for all expenditures; not allowing them access to information about family finances.

Using children: making the victim feel guilty about their parenting skills; making the victim responsible for all the children's misbehavior or mistakes; undermining the victim's authority and effectiveness with the children through criticism; telling the children that the victim is stupid or dumb—can't do anything right; threatening to take the children away or kill them; telling the victim that the Department of Child and Family Services will take the children away.

Coercion and threats: threatening to take the children away; threatening to destroy property; threatening to harm family or friends; making physical threats and/or actions toward the victim; threatening to leave the victim; threatening to commit suicide.

What are the effects of domestic violence on children?

Spousal abuse can have lasting emotional effects on children living in the same household. They often develop coping skills and strategies to intercede and protect the parent who is the victim of abuse. A parental victim may develop strategies to redirect the abuser away from the children, and as a result may be abused while trying to protect the children. Children who grow up in a household where a parent has been abused may imitate that abuse in relationships later in life.

Options for victims of domestic violence

- Contact a local domestic-violence program. These programs are in many communities around the country and can provide counseling and support groups; information about legal options, the criminal justice system, and social services; shelter; attorney referrals; vocational counseling; safety planning; and case advocacy. Programs will assist victims regardless of their decision to stay in the relationship or leave it..
- Create a comprehensive safety plan. With assistance from a victim-service professional, victims should create an individualized plan for safety in all situations, including a checklist of necessary items to take when leaving an abusive situation.
- Consider legal options. In most states, domestic violence is a crime. For information on criminal penalties for abusers, and protections for victims through the criminal justice system, victims should contact their local law enforcement or prosecutor's office. Reporting domestic-violence incidents may raise safety concerns, so this option should be discussed with a victim-service professional. Whether victims choose to report, it may be helpful to document evidence of abuse (e.g., pictures, witness statements, tape recordings), to be used in criminal proceedings, or in custody or divorce hearings. The State Attorney's office usually handles criminal proceedings and

restraining orders (check with your local courts for the court services that handle restraining orders).

What is an injunction?

An injunction is an order entered by the court after reviewing the situation, granting relief determined necessary for the protection of the victim(s) of domestic violence, dating violence or repeat violence. The injunction for protection remains in effect until modified or dissolved by the court at the request of either party.

How do I file for an injunction for protection?

In most jurisdictions, you must appear in person at the Clerk's Office to file for an injunction for protection. Staff members are available to assist you in completing the petition paperwork. The court will review your paperwork the same day you file your petition. If the court agrees you need protection, a temporary injunction for protection (restraining order) will be entered. The temporary injunction will take effect immediately after the respondent is served with a copy of it. It is valid until a hearing can be held or for a period of 15 days, whichever comes first. At the hearing, the judge will decide whether to issue a Final Judgment of Injunction for Protection Against Domestic Violence.

Do I have to file in the county where I live?

No, a petition for an injunction for protection against domestic violence may be filed in the county where you currently or temporarily reside, where the respondent resides, or where the domestic violence occurred. There is no minimum requirement of residency to petition for an injunction for protection. **NOTE:** Providing the court with false information on the petition for an injunction for protection is a criminal offense which could subject the violator to a term of imprisonment, a fine, or both.

Can I file for an injunction for protection before I have been abused?

Yes, if you are either a victim of domestic violence or if you have reasonable cause to believe you are in imminent danger of becoming the victim of domestic violence, you may file a Petition for an Injunction for Protection Against Domestic Violence.

What do I do if the injunction for protection is violated?

If there has been no arrest, may contact the Clerk of the Circuit Court's Office; unlike the original petition, this must be done in the county where the violation is alleged to have occurred. A Deputy Clerk will help you prepare an affidavit in support of the violation.

How can I get help in an emergency?

Immediately dial 911 and request help from the police

If the respondent is in the area and has not yet been served with the injunction, you may request that the police officer serve the respondent your copy of the injunction (emergency packet). File a police report for every violation, and get copies of the police report. National domestic-violence centers usually provide:

- A 24-hour crisis line
- Temporary shelter
- Advocacy and counseling for victims
- Advocacy and counseling for the children of victims
- Legal information, court accompaniment, and assistance with restraining orders
- Welfare/economic support
- Support groups for battered women and their children
- Information and referral
- Community education
- Outreach to schools, including education on teen dating violence and support for victims
- Batterers treatment
- Sexual-assault services

Important Phone Numbers

National Domestic Violence Hotline.....	(800) 799-SAFE (7233)
National Domestic Violence Hotline	(800) 787-3224 (TTY)
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.....	(303) 839-1852
National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.....	(800) 537-2238
National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence.....	(800) 222-2000
Women in Distress: 24-hour crisis line in English and Spanish.....	1-800-500-1119

Child Abuse

Abuse means any willful act or threatened act that results in any physical, mental, or sexual injury or harm that causes or is likely to cause the child’s physical, mental, or emotional health to be significantly impaired. Abuse of a child includes acts or omissions. Corporal discipline of a child by a parent or legal custodian for disciplinary purposes does not in itself constitute abuse when it does not result in harm to the child. The legal definition of a child is any person under the age of eighteen.

Any person who knows or has reasonable cause to suspect child abuse, abandonment, or neglect by a person responsible for a child's welfare is required to report that information to the state's toll-free hotline, an appropriate law-enforcement agency, or (in the case of a child's death), the medical examiner responsible for the city, town, county, or other area where the death occurred.

Other Kinds of Child Maltreatment

Abandonment is a situation where the parent, legal custodian, or the caregiver responsible for a child's welfare, although able to care for the child, doesn't provide for the child's support and makes no effort to communicate with the child—legally, this is a willful rejection of parental obligations. Token or inadequate efforts to support or communicate with the child may result in a court declaring the child to be abandoned.

Mental injury means substantially decreased ability to function intellectually or psychologically within the normal range of performance and behavior.

Neglect occurs when a child is deprived of necessary food, clothing, shelter, or medical treatment, or when a child is permitted to live in an environment where such deprivation or environment significantly impairs or threatens to impair the child's physical, mental, or emotional health.

Harm to a child's health or welfare can occur when any person inflicts upon the child (or allows to be inflicted) physical, mental, or emotional injury. In determining whether harm has occurred, the following factors are considered: the child's age; any prior history of injuries to the child; the location of the injury on the child's body; the number of injuries; and the type of trauma inflicted.

Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms

The following material is reproduced with permission of the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (2003).

The first step in helping abused or neglected children is learning to recognize the signs of child abuse and neglect. The presence of a single sign does not prove child abuse is occurring in a family; however, when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination, you should take a closer look at the situation and consider the possibility of child abuse.

If you do suspect a child is being harmed, reporting your suspicions may protect the child and get help for the family. Contact your local child-protective services agency or police department. For more information about where and how to file a report, call the Childhelp USA® National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD).

Recognizing Child Abuse

The following signs may signal the presence of child abuse or neglect.

The Child:

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance;
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention;
- Has learning problems that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes;

- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen;
- Lacks adult supervision;
- Is overly compliant, an overachiever, or too responsible; or
- Comes to school early, stays late, and does not want to go home.

The Parent:

- Shows little concern for the child, rarely responding to the school's requests for information, for conferences, or for home visits;
- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home;
- Asks the classroom teacher to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves;
- Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome;
- Demands perfection or a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot give; or
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs.

The Parent and Child:

- Rarely touch or look at each other;
- Consider their relationship entirely negative; or
- State that they do not like each other.

None of these signs taken alone proves that child abuse is present in a family. But when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination, there is the possibility of child abuse.

Types of Abuse

The following are some signs often associated with physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. It is important to note, however, these types of abuse are more typically found in combination than alone. A physically abused child, for example, is often emotionally abused as well, and a sexually abused child also may be neglected.

Signs of Physical Abuse

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the child:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes;
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school;
- Seems frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home from school;
- Shrinks at the approach of adults; or
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver.

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury;
- Describes the child as "evil," or in some other very negative way;

- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child; or
- Has a history of abuse as a child.

Signs of Neglect

Consider the possibility of neglect when the child:

- Is frequently absent from school;
- Begs or steals food or money from classmates;
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses;
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor;
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather;
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs; or
- States there is no one at home to provide care.

Consider the possibility of neglect when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child;
- Seems apathetic or depressed;
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner;
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs; or
- States that there is no one at home to provide care

Consider the possibility of neglect when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child;
- Seems apathetic or depressed;
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner; or
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the child:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting;
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities;
- Reports nightmares or bedwetting;
- Experiences a sudden change in appetite;
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior;
- Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age 14;
- Runs away; or
- Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver.

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child's contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex;
- Is secretive and isolated; or
- Is jealous or controlling with family members.

Signs of Emotional Maltreatment

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the child:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression;
- Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example);
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development;
- Has attempted suicide; or
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent.

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child;
- Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's problems; or
- Overtly rejects the child.

This fact sheet was adapted, with permission, from *Recognizing Child Abuse: What Parents Should Know*. Prevent Child Abuse America, © 2003.

1-800-96-ABUSE (1-800-962-2873)

What are the consequences of filing a false child-abuse report?

In some instances, a parent may be tempted to file a false child-abuse report against the child's mother or father. This is usually done to gain some kind of advantage over the other parent. You should never resort to this, and parents are strongly discouraged from this type of action. According to most state statutes, a person who knowingly and willfully makes a false report of child abuse, abandonment, or neglect, or who advises another to make a false report, is guilty of a felony in the third degree. However, anyone making a report who is acting in good faith is immune from liability.

Important Phone Numbers*

Missing Children Info.....	1-800-342-0821
Runaway Helpline.....	1-800-621-4000
Child Abuse Hotline	1-800-962-2873
Child Support Hotline.....	1-800-622-KIDS
National Center for Missing Children.....	1-800-843-5678
Parent Help Line.....	1-800-FLA-LOVE

Choosing a Mental-Health Professional

One of the hurdles in finding a qualified therapist to help your family is wading through the various kinds of mental-health professionals. At a minimum, you will want to seek a professional who holds a license in marriage and family therapy, mental-health counseling, or social work. These professionals will have either a master's degree or a doctorate. Keep in mind, however, that the individual therapist is always more important than their degree, certification, licensure, or other qualification. Most of the professional's expertise will come as they specialize in their work. You will want to make sure that a professional you choose has experience with divorce issues and helping families in transition.

Chapter 8 Review Questions

1. **Which of the following is an example of domestic violence?**
 - A. Intimidation
 - B. Emotional abuse
 - C. Economic abuse
 - D. All of the above

2. **Making the victim feel guilty, name calling, embarrassing, humiliating, & demeaning are considered:**
 - A. Physical abuse
 - B. Social abuse
 - C. Sexual abuse
 - D. Emotional abuse

3. **All of the following are signs of physical abuse except:**
 - A. Consistent dirtiness and severe body odor
 - B. Unexplained burns, bites, or bruises
 - C. Shrinking at the approach of adults
 - D. Reporting injury by a parent or caregiver

4. **Filing a false child-abuse report:**
 - A. Is sometimes necessary when dealing with a difficult parent
 - B. Is never a good idea
 - C. Should be considered only as a last resort
 - D. None of the above

5. **When children witness one parent abusing the other, this is considered:**
 - A. Unhealthy for most kids
 - B. Child abuse
 - C. Neglect
 - D. All of the above

Final Summary Questions

True or False

1. Continued conflict between parents is the most destructive aspect of divorce and the most detrimental to children.
2. When parents are dealing with their children, the age of the child is not an issue.
3. Finances are among the biggest challenges facing divorcing couples.
4. If possible, both parents should together tell their children about the decision to divorce.
5. Most experts today view divorce as a single event.
6. Mediators help parents focus on the important issues and help them avoid blaming one another.
7. Parents are justified in interrupting visitation rights if the other parent refuses to pay child support.
8. Parents should work hard to avoid any negative emotions during a divorce.
9. Parents should understand and respect the fact that the other parent will have different rules when the children are with them.
10. When dealing with a difficult parent, the other parent should become just as difficult.
11. It is not uncommon for children to have varying emotional responses to divorce.
12. You must like your co-parent in order to be effective.
13. Parents should make room for a variety of reactions from their children.
14. Parents will have difficulty making good choices for their kids when they do not take care of themselves.
15. When introducing a new dating partner, parents should trust a child's initial reaction.
16. Parenting plans are only a guideline and parents should be flexible with one another.
17. If you cannot communicate with your co-parent, you should speak through the children to keep the peace.
18. Grieving can be difficult, but it is ultimately healthy.
19. Children ages 3-6 are most concerned with how the divorce will affect their future relationships.
20. Physical complaints in children are rare during the divorce process.
21. Eating and sleeping problems are a normal reaction to divorce for elementary-school-age children.
22. The more comfortable a parent is with the idea of divorce, the more comfortable their child or children will be.
23. The first priority after a divorce should be getting into a new stable relationship.
24. New step-parents should take their lead from biological parents with respect to discipline.
25. One of the pitfalls for new step-parents is working too hard.
26. You can experience a lot of difficult emotions and still find ways to express them appropriately while being an effective parent to your children.
27. A child witnessing one parent being abused by the other is usually not that damaging.

28. Your children can be happy and healthy in spite of the fact that their parents are divorced.
29. Finding ways to compliment your co-parent's parenting abilities is important.
30. You should be supportive and involved if your co-parent thinks your children should go to counseling.

Reference Books and Websites for Parents, Teens, & Children

Ahrons, Constance

The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Comes Apart

Arnold, William

When Your Parents Divorce

(Ages 12+)

Blau, Melinda

Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting

Boegehold, Betty

Daddy Doesn't Live Here Anymore

Brown, Marc & Brown, Laurie Krasny

Dinosaurs Divorce

Bustanoby, Andy

But I Didn't Want a Divorce

Clapp, Genevieve

Divorce & New Beginnings

Garon, Risa J.

Taking Good Care of Yourself: For Teens Going Through Separation and Divorce

Grollman, Earl

Talking about Divorce: A Dialogue Between Parents and Child

(Ages 5+)

Hazen, Barbara

Two Homes to Live In: A Child's Eye View of Divorce

(Ages 4-8)

Johnson, Laurene & Rosenfeld, Georglyn

Divorced Kids

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth

On Death and Dying

Lansky, Vicki

Vicki Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents: Helping Your Children Cope With Divorce and its Aftermath

Marston, Stephanie

The Divorced Parent: Success Strategies for Raising Your Children After Separation

MacGregor, Cynthia

The Divorce Helpbook for Teens (Rebuilding Books)

Poroun, Arthur

Dinosaurs Divorce: Coping with Divorcing Parents

(Ages 3-7)

Ricci, Isolina

Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Shared Custody Work

Stahl, Phillip Michael

Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs

Wallerstein, Judith S. & Blakeslee, Sandra

What About the Kids? Raising Your Children Before, During, and After Divorce

Wallerstein, Judith S. & Kelly, Joan Berlin

Surviving the Breakup

Wolf, Anthony E.

“Why Did You Have to Get a Divorce? And When Can I Get a Hamster?” A Guide to Parenting Through Divorce

Internet Resources

- http://www.aamft.org/families/consumer_updates/childrenandDivorce.htm
- <http://www.licensedtherapists.com>
- <http://www.divorcemag.com/>
- <http://divorcesource.com>
- <http://divorcecnet.com>
- <http://www.aamft.org/TherapistLocator/index.asp>
- <http://www.divorcesupport.com/>
- <http://www.divorcecare.com/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Maione, Ph.D., has been working with individuals, couples, and families involved in the divorce process for over 15 years. He works extensively with the Broward County Family Court to help divorcing couples navigate the divorce process while keeping sane and protecting their children's best interests. He received a doctorate in Marriage & Family Therapy from Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Dr. Maione is also a clinical member and approved supervisor for the American Association for Marriage & Family Therapy and has written several articles in the field of marriage & family therapy. Dr. Maione teaches in the Marriage & Family Therapy and Psychology programs at Nova Southeastern University; he is also an adjunct faculty member of Capella University, Barry University, and is the Past President (2000-2004) of the Broward Association for Marriage & Family Therapy.

Children & Divorce A Positive Parenting Approach

ANSWER SHEET

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

Court Case # _____

IMPORTANT: There is only one correct answer for each question. Please refer to the first page of this document for complete instructions for submitting answer sheets. It is not necessary to call to confirm that we received your answer sheets. We will send you a confirmation email within 24 hours.

Chapter 2

1. (a) (b) (c) (d)
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Chapter 3

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Chapter 5

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Chapter 6

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Chapter 7

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Chapter 8

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3. (a) (b) (c) (d)
4. (a) (b) (c) (d)
5. (a) (b) (c) (d)

**Children & Divorce
A Positive Parenting Approach**

ANSWER SHEET

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

Court Case # _____

Final Summary Questions

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