



JERE SMITH

Helping your child cope with divorce PART 1

By Linda Morgan

BETSY'S 9-YEAR-OLD SON JUST wouldn't talk about the divorce. He was angry, and that rage sometimes surfaced at school. But around his mother and big sister? Not a word. Even his therapist met with stony silence.

Betsy, a Bellevue resident, figured it was time to take action. So she invented "sketch book" therapy: "Once a week we'd have an hour to kill and I'd take 'dictation' from him," she says. She'd start out by asking fun, trivial questions such as "What are your favorite TV shows?" and segue into "What are you worried about this week?"

Eventually she got her son to talk — about TV, about his pets and about the upsetting fact that "Daddy doesn't live with us anymore."

By finding a way to allow her child to express himself, Betsy is going a long way toward helping him adjust to the divorce, according to Carl E. Pickhardt, Ph.D., author of *The Everything Parent's Guide to Children and Divorce*. "A child needs to speak up to express the thoughts and feelings that make up his or her inner experience," he writes. "Talking out hurt feelings allows the child to identify and process what is emotionally going on, and enables him to feel acknowledged and supported."

That's the concept behind the "Family Changes" groups Elsbeth Ruder meets with during lunchtime at Island Park Elementary on Mercer Island. The students, grouped by age, gather weekly for 10-week sessions.

"Many parents don't realize how much separation and divorce impact their children," says Ruder, a Mercer Island Youth and Family Services counselor. "The kids don't always have a place to talk about it. They hear fighting and try to sort out what's happening, but their brains aren't developed enough to figure out what's going on."

When they can't make sense of what's happening at home, it's "harder to focus on that math problem," she says. In fact, it's not unusual for signs of stress to show up in the classroom. "Kids can't always say, 'I did poorly on that history test because I'm worried about my parents,'" says Ruder.

John Ganz, an upper-school counselor at The Bush School in Seattle, says parents going through marital discord should watch for declines in their child's school performance. These can be warning signs that things are not OK.



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"The first thing that begins to diminish with stress is cognitive ability," says Ganz. "We're asking kids to think — to be analytical, to problem-solve. When those begin to fall off the plate, we know that whatever is happening in that child's life is having an impact."

Parents and teachers should also watch for behavioral changes. "Kids get depressed, forgetful or angry; they might not cope as well as they did before," says Ganz. "They may be accident prone or self-destructive, and their peer relationships can change."

What kids worry about

In Ruder's groups, the kids — who range from kindergarteners to fifth-graders — talk about finding ways to cope, Ruder says. "They're very worried about seeming different from other kids and that kids will

think poorly of them because their parents are divorced."

What else do they worry about? How to deal with their parents' arguments and whose job it is to stop them. Often, children think that role falls to them, says Jennifer Stoakes, a Seattle psychotherapist. "Kids think they can fix things," says Stoakes. "They'll look for ways to make this go away. If they can get their parents in the same room, they'll sometimes grab both parents' hands and try to link them together."

Some kids feel they should be taking care of their parents, Stoakes says. "They assess the conflict and offer solutions." They figure out — often on an unconscious level — that if they have behavior problems, their parents will have to work together. "That's when you see things surface like eating disorders and bed-wetting," she says.

What parents worry about

Parents often struggle to hide their own pain from their children. But the kids see right through that, says Stoakes. "Let's say you've had a run-in with your ex. Then you go get your kids from school and you try to look cheerful. Your kids will pick up on that disconnect."

Kids "read" parents on many levels and can tell if there's an inconsistency between what you're saying and what you're feeling, she says. "Better to say something like 'Mommy's having a hard day.'"

Not that parents should share every sordid detail. "That's tricky territory," Stoakes says. "It comes back to knowing your own child." Try to strike a balance between clarity and common sense, she advises. Ruder, the school counselor, suggests sharing kid-appropriate information, but protecting them from "the nastier stuff and negative feelings."

Dealing with those negative feelings takes skill, especially since your children (in most cases) need to have a relationship with your ex-partner. "Parents should realize that their kids see them as mom and dad. They don't get that mom is mad at this 'person'; she's mad at dad — the one they love," says Ruder. "It's confusing, especially for younger kids. They're thinking, 'Why does mom dislike this person I love?'"

That means not telling your kids what a rotten so-and-so your ex is. And that means not recruiting your child to Team Mom, or using him or her as a sounding board.

"There's often a lot at stake — custody issues,

estate issues — and parents have their own agendas,” says Ganz. “They want the child to support their position; they give kids information that’s self-serving. It can be very destructive for the child.”

But with a measure of self-control, parents can put on that positive front, says Betsy, who regularly assures her children that their father’s a good guy. “I don’t believe it for a minute. But I feel the kids’ best shot at happiness in this life is to think their father is a good person.” ■

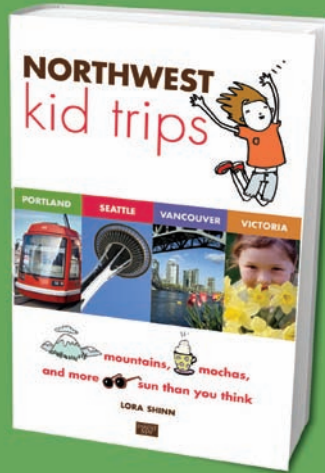
Linda Morgan is ParentMap’s associate editor and the author of Beyond Smart: Boosting Your Child’s Social, Emotional and Academic Potential. Part 2 of her 3-part series on divorce will appear in the July issue of ParentMap.

Helping your kids cope with divorce

- Let your kids know their feelings are important and that they should feel free to express them.
- Find external support for yourself so you have the strength to act appropriately — and with control — in front of your children.
- Be positive in front of your kids, even when saying things like “Your dad wants to hang out with you this weekend.”
- Watch your children for signs of anger, sadness, anxiety or other red flags that might indicate they are having problems.
- Keep up an open, ongoing dialogue with your kids so they feel safe enough to tell you what’s bothering them.
- Understand that there will be changes in the parent/child relationship. Divorce can change a child’s view of who the parents are. If your child is struggling, provide him with an outside, neutral person to talk to.

From *The Everything Parent’s Guide to Children and Divorce* by Carl E. Pickhardt, Ph.D. Available at: amazon.com.

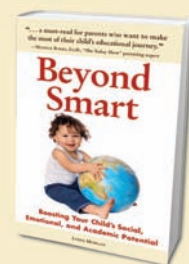
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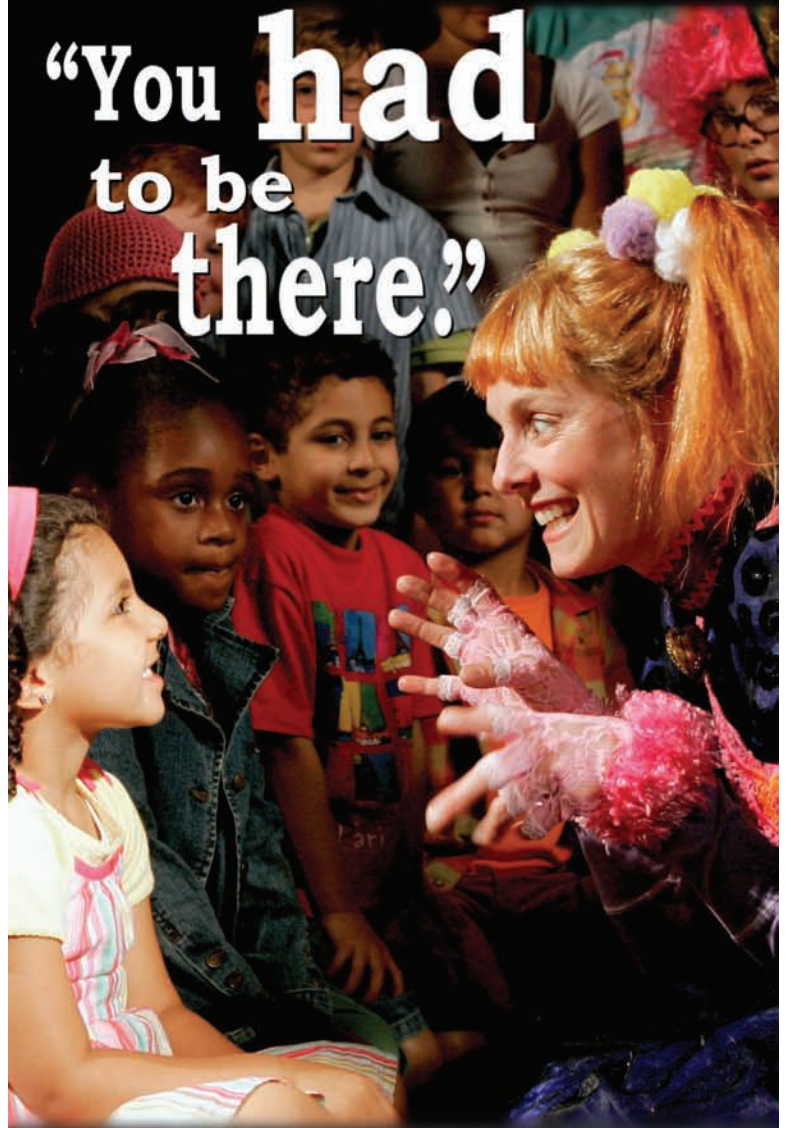


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Helping your child cope with divorce PART 2

By Linda Morgan

YOU'D NEVER KNOW THAT GINGER AND JERRY once lived together as a happy, harmonious married couple, simpatico on most matters life tossed their way. Who knew that parenthood could change all that?

When Ginger looks back, she realizes she should have seen trouble coming as Jerry began dictating which prenatal vitamins she should take — and when. “Turns out he has control issues,” says Ginger, who’s now divorced. “Sometimes you don’t know how you are going to be as parents until it’s too late.”

Now, like many divorced couples, Ginger and Jerry find themselves deeply entrenched in opposite corners when it comes to raising their two kids, ages 3 and 7. They disagree on pretty much everything: activities (he micro-manages the kids; she lets them make their own decisions); education (he wants private; she wants public); discipline (she’s hard-line; he’s permissive); and playtime (he’s involved and engaged; she’ll say, “Go find something to do”).

And there’s more. “When the kids don’t feel well, he’ll race to get them on antibiotics,” says Ginger. “I’ll just offer them lemon juice and honey.”

Which one’s practicing picture-perfect parenting? Probably neither; Ginger and Jerry simply do things differently. “There’s often an ongoing competition among parents, whether married or divorced, as to who is being a better parent,” says Dr. Cora Breuner, associate professor of adolescent medicine at Seattle Children’s Hospital. “The problem is, divorced parents can’t have that end-of-the-day ‘pillow talk,’ where they rehash what happened and how they can be on the same page.”

Each feels his or her way is the best way, says Seattle psychologist Wendy Hutchins-Cook, Ph.D. “Dads worry moms are hovering and coddling, and moms worry the kids’ emotions and activities won’t be attended to as well as they have been in the past.”

Both worry about what’s going on in the other household. Their window into that household — and the one who ends up being reporter/watchdog/spy — is the child. But don’t count on that child for reliable information, says Hutchins-Cook. “A 12-year-old might say, ‘Mom wasn’t home after we got back from school.’ What you

don’t realize is that mom has alerted the neighbor, who’s keeping an eye on things.”

The kids — always caught in the middle — often report negative news about one parent to the other, because that’s what they think the parent wants to hear. “They’re trying to prove their love and loyalty,” says Hutchins-Cook. “So



“**Things work better for everyone when both parents let go, just a little**”



while your kid’s not a liar, chances are he’s not giving you the fly-on-the-wall truth when he tells you that at Dad’s, he gets to watch TV all the time and stay up late.”

Different styles

Differences in parenting style often come into sharp focus when the kids bounce between two residences. Connie Curlett, a Seattle mother of three — now 20, 19 and 16 — became a divorce and parenting counselor after her own divorce 14 years ago.

“My ex was Disneyland Dad,” she says. “My children would come home from a weekend of total

freedom and fun, and face rules.” Curlett let them know the “no restrictions” concept wouldn’t fly in her house. “I’d say, ‘Do you need some time in your room to remember where you are?’”

Tracy, a Bellevue mom who’s been divorced for four years, found that her ex-husband parented in a laid-back, unstructured fashion (no regular bedtime, little attention to schoolwork), while she favored a take-charge, always-on-top-of-things style. “I’m type A, he’s type Z,” she says.

After a while, both Tracy and Curlett came to the same conclusion: Things work better for everyone when both parents let go, just a little. “You have to figure out what’s within your control and what’s not,” Curlett says. “It comes down to, how much do you want to argue? And how do you want your kids to view all this?”

Tracy claims she’s learned to live with the small stuff. “I decided my ex-husband has a right to establish his own rules at his house,” she says. “If we don’t let go of things, the kids are the losers.”

Adam, a divorced dad who lives in Kirkland, says kids want to see their parents get along — whether they’re married or not. “When you have differences — when you’re continually negotiating and arguing — the child knows it,” says Adam, whose two teenage daughters alternate between his home and their mother’s. “I’ve learned that you and your ex-spouse can’t always feel the same way about things, and that sometimes both points of view have validity.”

Often, kids blame themselves for the turmoil. “Kids are self-focused, so they automatically think the problem has something to do with them,” says Jessica Arango, a Seattle family therapist. “They think, if only they’d done all their homework or worked harder,” the problem wouldn’t exist, says Arango. And when they’re the focus of the fights, their anxiety increases. “When you’re pitted against each other, you are tearing your child in different directions.”

Navigating differences

What’s the best way to negotiate parenting differences with an ex while preserving your child’s well being and, with any luck, your own?

Talk things over, says Breuner. “Parents will be in a relationship with each other forever and they need to come to grips with that,” she says. “They should be able to call the other parent and say, ‘We need to discuss these issues.’”

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If that effort fails, seek help from a therapist or family counselor. What works best? Schedule a session or two with the counselor at the beginning of the divorce process. "Parents give the message to their kids 'We can manage this' when they work as a team," says Hutchins-Cook. "They provide a tone and mindset for themselves and their children that they're in this together."

If parents can't find common ground on an issue — and the problem is a big one or involves the child's safety — it may be time to get social service agencies or the courts to intervene, writes Carl E. Pickhardt, Ph.D., in his book *The Everything Parent's Guide to Children and Divorce*.

But before bringing in the big guns, try to work things out. "Kids won't learn to resolve conflicts if their parents can't," says Breuner.

Finally, remember that kids are smart and resilient. They can accept that dad and mom — and their parenting styles — are different, says Arango. When things go well, they learn that issues and disagreements can be resolved, and that parents can move forward and work through problems. "When parents see their children's needs are bigger than their own emotional pain and are able to manage their children's lives together, it's a wonderful gift to their kids," says Hutchins-Cook. ■

Linda Morgan is ParentMap's associate editor and the author of Beyond Smart: Boosting Your Child's Social, Emotional and Academic Potential. Part 3 of her 3-part series on divorce will appear in the August issue of ParentMap.

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JERE SMITH

Helping your child cope with divorce PART 3

By Linda Morgan

THE DIVORCE — INTENSE, DEMANDING AND emotionally draining — is finally over. Now you're picking up the pieces, determined to keep your children on track and in line.

Everyone is advising you to “move on.”

The truth is, you're ready to look ahead and face life without your ex. You're venturing out with friends, even sneaking peeks at online dating sites.

But the relationship thing, you realize, is different this time around. You worry about the way your kids will react if you bring someone new into their lives; about whether your ex will be cooperative, jealous, intrusive or a combination of all three; about your next love interest — what if he comes with his own kids and a jealous, intrusive ex?

Maybe by now you've learned a few things about relationships, families and yourself. Even so, fusing the family with dating and — who knows? — remarrying, is challenging no matter how well versed you are (or think you are) about the rules, management and etiquette of divorce. After all, the same studies (see *divorce.com*) that suggest 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce also claim second marriages fail a whopping 65 percent of the time.

Should he meet the kids?

Jenny, married for 15 years before her divorce six years ago, keeps her kids and her dates apart until things get serious. “I don't think it's healthy for my children to connect with someone I'm seeing, then have that person go away.”

Jenny says she very focused on the well-being of her kids, now ages 19, 16 and 14. That's why she's careful about who they meet — and when. Still, her children have felt the fallout of broken relationships. Since Jenny's divorce, she's been engaged — twice — to the same person. “The kids' hearts were in that relationship. When we broke it off, it was another big loss for them.”

Dr. Cora Breuner, associate professor of adolescent medicine at Seattle Children's, advises divorced parents to proceed with caution when it comes to injecting a new partner into their kids' world. “We're so careful with other things — making sure our kids are in car seats, the right cribs, the right schools — but we often don't give this issue much thought,” she says.

Breuner says parents should do some serious introspection before exposing their children to a sig-



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nificant someone. “Is this the person you're willing to integrate into your family? Are your kids really ready to meet someone new?” Waiting mere weeks before introducing that someone isn't enough, she says. She'd like three or four months to pass — and she'd like the couple to survive an argument or two. “Check in with yourself first,” says Breuner. “Be careful that you're not getting right back into the same mess you were in before. Don't pull someone back into your kids' lives and watch your kids have to mop you up again.”

Yet kids seem to want — and often encourage — their divorced folks to date, parents report. That's because they think a romantic relationship is what will make mom or dad happy, says Stephen P. Chick, a Snoqualmie mental health therapist. “That's what's promoted everywhere — on Disney shows, in school, when kids see other moms and dads together.”

And kids typically feel relieved when a new adult appears on the scene. “Often, a divorced parent

starts to depend on the kids as their support person,” says Breuner. “When another adult comes into the picture, some of that burden is taken off the child.”

There's a “honeymoon phase” that happens in the early stages of a new relationship when everyone is on their best behavior, says Chick. Then the honeymoon ends and the tension begins. “The kids soon realize it's not all fun and games. They're not seeing their mom or dad as much. Maybe they don't like the new boyfriend or girlfriend.”

This generates stress, says Chick. “The divorce is a bomb that goes off in a kid's life.

Then the parent starts dating, and it creates another mini-bomb.”

Managing the stress

Things can heat up for the children when one parent has strong views about the other parent's new boyfriend or girlfriend — and voices those views to the kids. These are the kids who end up with eating disorders, headaches or stomach pain, says Breuner. “They are so anxious and stressed, they can't get into a relaxed place.”

If the new “friend” caused the divorce, the heat cranks up. “If your relationship started with an affair, you cannot expect your children to welcome your new friend with open arms,” says Robert E. Emery, Ph.D., in his book *The Truth About Children and Divorce*.

What else makes kids anxious? Parents who let a new boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse act like a parent. “Parents tend to give their partners power,” says Breuner. “That's not fair to the child's other parent and not cool for the child. The new person is not the child's parent and never will be.”

That means it's not the partner's job to criticize or reprimand the child. “That kind of overstepping the bounds can cause horrible damage and can take months to fix,” says Breuner.

What, then, is the new partner's role? Think “friend.” He (or she) should work on bonding with the kids and building their trust, says Chick, especially if he intends to be in there for the long haul. “He needs to throw the ball with them, go to the ballet classes, drive the carpools, play the video games. That's the trust building.”

Moving in

After three years of dating, Ken and Sherry moved into their Seattle home two years ago with their

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daughters — they each have two — ages 13 through 18. “My girls really wanted this to work for me, but it was difficult for them,” says Ken. “They didn’t choose to be put together with these other kids.”

Ken and Sherry share custody of the girls with their former spouses, which means they must schedule a convoluted calendar of sleepovers, doctor appointments, school events and social activities, while toggling houses, backpacks and parents.

It also means they must navigate their dramatically different parenting styles. “When I’m with my kids, I always block out that time and don’t make other plans,” says Ken. Sherry finds that kind of attention excessive and feels it makes having a social life next to impossible.

A doting dad, Ken is always on call. “I’ll pick the kids up anywhere, anytime. I’ll run and get the bagels and pop when they’re doing a school project,” says Ken. Sherry, hoping to instill independence, is more likely to let the girls fend for themselves.

How do they make it work? They’ve learned to bend — just a little — in their partner’s direction. Ken has scaled back his hovering-helicopter style, and Sherry has become more involved and hands on. “We’ve both been influenced by each other,” says Ken.

Ken and Sherry seem to be doing well. And the kids? They’re doing well, too. “It’s a work in progress,” says Ken. In June, his oldest daughter graduated from high school. At the graduation, the speaker asked the graduates’ siblings to stand up. Ken’s younger daughter and Sherry’s two girls rose together. “I had a lump in my throat,” says Ken. ■

Linda Morgan is ParentMap’s associate editor and the author of Beyond Smart: Boosting Your Child’s Social, Emotional and Academic Potential.



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