

Top Ten Ways to Protect Your Kids From The Fallout Of A High Conflict Break-Up

by Joan B. Kelly, Ph.D

1. Talk to your children about your separation.

Studies show that only 5 percent of parents actually sit down, explain to their children when a marriage is breaking up, and encourage the kids to ask questions. Nearly one quarter of parents say nothing, leaving their children in total confusion. Talk to your kids. Tell them, in very simple terms, what it all means to them and their lives. When parents do not explain what's happening to their children, the kids feel anxious, upset and lonely and find it much harder to cope with the separation.

2. Be discreet.

Recognise that your children love you both and think of how to reorganise things in a way that respects their relationship with both parents. Don't leave adversarial papers, filings and affidavits out on your kitchen counter for children to read. Don't talk to your best friend, your mother, your solicitor on the phone about legal matters or your ex when the kids are in the next room. They may hear you. Sometimes kids creep up to the door to listen. Even though they're disturbed by conflict and meanness between their parents, kids are inevitably curious -and ill- equipped to understand these adult matters.

3. Act like grown-ups. Keep your conflict away from the kids.

Even parents with high levels of anger can “encapsulate” their conflict, creating a protective buffer for the children by saving arguments or fights for a mediator’s office – or a scheduled meeting at a coffee shop. It may seem obvious but so many separating parents continue to fall down on this front. When parents put children in the middle of their conflict and use them as messengers, sounding-boards, or spies, children often become depressed and angry and may develop behavioural problems.

4. Dad, stay in the picture.

Long-term studies show that the more involved fathers are after separation and divorce, the better. Develop a child-centred parenting plan that allows a continuing and meaningful relationship with both parents. Where a good father-child relationship exists, kids grow into adolescence and young adulthood as well-adjusted as married-family children. High levels of appropriate father involvement are linked to better academic functioning in kids as well as better adjustment overall. That's true at every age level and particularly in adolescents. Fathers, be more than a “fun” dad. Help with homework and projects, use appropriate discipline, and be emotionally available to talk about problems.

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5. Mum, deal with anger appropriately.

In their anger and pain, some mothers may actively try to keep Dad out of the children's lives -even when they are good fathers whom the children love. When you're hurting, it's easy to think you never want to see the ex again, and to convince yourself that's also best for the kids. But children's needs during separation are very different from their parents. Research reports children consistently saying, "Tell my dad I want to see him more. I want to see him for longer periods of time. Tell my mum to let me see my dad."

6. Be a good parent.

You can be forgiven for momentarily "losing it" in anger or grief, but not for long. Going through a separation is not a vacation from parenting, providing appropriate discipline, monitoring your children, maintaining your expectations about school, being emotionally available. Competent parenting has emerged as one of the most important protective factors in terms of children's positive adjustment to separation.

7. Manage your own mental health.

If feelings of depression, anxiety, or anger continue to overwhelm you, seek help. Even a few sessions of therapy can be enormously useful. Remember, your own mental health has an impact on your children.

8. Keep the people your children care about in their lives.

Encourage your children to stay connected to your ex's family and important friends. If possible, use the same babysitters or child-care. This stable network strengthens a child's feeling that they are not alone in this world but have a deep and powerful support system – an important factor in becoming a psychologically healthy adult.

9. Be thoughtful about your future love life.

Ask yourself: must your children meet everyone you date? Take time, a lot of time, before you remarry or cohabit again. Young children in particular, form attachments to your potential life partners and, if new relationships break up, loss after loss may lead to depression and lack of trust in children. And don't expect your older kids to instantly love someone you've chosen – this person will have to earn their respect and affection.

10. Pay your child support.

Even if you're angry or access to your children is withheld, pay child support regularly. Children whose parents separate or divorce face much more economic instability than their married counterparts, even when support is paid. Don't make the situation worse. In this as in all things, let your message to the kids be that you care so much about them that you will keep them separate, and safe, from any conflict. They will appreciate it as they get older.