

# RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILDREN IN DIVORCE

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It is impossible to write glorious, joyous articles about divorce. It is fundamentally a failure of two people, who at one point resolved to spend their lives together. If that was only an event in the life of the two adults concerned, this would not be a tragedy. But when it is an event in the life of children, it is, always a tragedy, with no intellectual way out of it. Even if the divorce is reached in mutual agreement, in peace and harmony, and understanding it is time to move on—it is a tragedy for the children, because they are losing the only family they had. If you want to understand children who go through this experience, this is a realistic point of view.

Of course, if the relationship of the parents was deadly, hateful, toxic, aggressive and violent before the divorce, it will be a relative relief for the children, but only because they actually lost their real family a long time before the divorce.

## **Something in the child splits when the parents split.**

As adults, we may grow out of old traditions and conventions about relationship, marriage, sexual life, fidelity, faithfulness and life-long marriage and be experimental, adventurous, explorative and modern (whatever that word means!). However, children's fundamental needs do not change every decade: they need the loving mother and father who brought them into the world and gave them family, home and safety, to be still loving each other as they grow up, maintaining a loving place, family, home and security they need. When this basic condition breaks, the fundamental safety in their life falls apart and there is nothing that can put it together again. The end of the marriage and the united family is a colossal loss for children, regardless of the reasons for the adults to divorce. Nothing in their lives will ever be the same again. Something in the child splits when the parents split. We tear them apart when we tear our marriage apart. That is the starting point for understanding their experience.

From that point on, caring for children entails primarily the efforts to minimise that damage.

The war must stop! Many divorces are reached by one partner creating pain, anger, disappointment, depression, collapse and humiliation for the other. What follows is often a war in which no-one can win: property, custody, maintenance, finances, responsibilities, holidays—usually in dispute for some time until life re-settles on a totally different basis. Legal experts, warring lawyers, family members who were friends yesterday become opposing sides, common friends disappear or fall to one side or the other, while the children who love and are life-committed to both parents, fall in the middle of

that battlefield. They are the real casualty of that unwinnable war. No-one can win these wars anyway: the children are and will be on both sides. They don't have alternative parents.

This war must stop as soon as possible to minimise the ongoing damage it causes children. Better still, never to start this war, but most people fail that threshold test.

### **Home**

Adults have options that children do not. They cannot create their own home ; it has to be created for them. Divorcing adults can make previously safe children into anxious wandering refugees, bundled like pieces of luggage between two households, in each of which a new family is being created and where both parents of *their* families are not present at the same time. Nothing can make the broken *one* home whole again. Often, one of the two homes, doesn't really exist for them at all.

Nothing can replace the *one home*, but being completely at home in each of the separate units can help; a frictionless transition between the two homes can help; respect and appreciation between the two households can help; having dedicated rooms for each child in which they are *completely* at home can help; some regular moments of the original family still being together can help. Nothing will restore the wholeness of one family home they once had, but damage can be minimised.

### **Love**

Once lost, love is hard to remember and respect, and once lost, is hard to restore. It is so hard for adults in separation to remember that for children, love and respect for their father and mother is not broken once the romantic connection between the parents has broken. There are still two people who brought them into this world. *The children* did not decide to divorce their father and mother. The separation of their parents which is an irreversible destruction of what they had before might be inevitable, but hostility, disrespect and heartlessness between their parents *is not* inevitable. There are choices about it. Often, as a counsellor for divorcing parents, when I see them individually, I wish to say to them:

Woman/mother—you may not love this man anymore and you may not want him *at all* in your life, but this man is THE only real father your children will ever have. If he breaks, something will break in them, if he disappears, something will be missing in them forever. Support his fatherhood as much as you can. Otherwise, they will be looking for a replacement father for the rest of their lives.

Man/father—you may have lost the love and attraction to this woman, but this woman is THE only mother your children will ever have. If she breaks, something fundamental in their heart will break. If

she is hurt and being humiliated, the same will happen to a deep part of themselves. Her wellbeing *is* your children's wellbeing. Therefore, on some deep level, her wellbeing is your business.

The children cannot understand the end of love and respect between two adults. Minimise the destruction of that as much as you can. Speaking badly of the other parent is toxic for children. They cannot process it. Stop it before you start or stop it when you read these words. Families tend to take sides in divorce, creating separate groups of hostility. Stop it—it damages children.

**In the child's heart, the original family remains their original family.**

The separating adults can start new original families with other people, but the children *cannot* have another original family. This one is the one they came into, forming their earliest memories, shaping their worlds. It is a hard standard of responsibility and humanness to keep respecting the original family that you are destroying. It is hard not to feel the need to justify the separation by talking about the original family, the other partner, the family life that was there, in order to separate.

This is a duty—minimise the destruction of the image and memory of the only family of origin the children will carry for the rest of their life. They will carry it for the rest of their lives, and they will also carry the destruction of it for the rest of their lives. They will carry the way in which their parents carry each other for the rest of their lives. Minimise the damage as much as you can.

Much more could be said about it, but the spirit of this message is obvious: love and community are more than the personal emotional experiences of the individuals who create it. When children are invited into this union, what happens to that union and to its members *IS* their business. Consult them in your spirit before and during what you do. This family you are destroying now, is *NOT* just your private property. It is the children's property also.

**Creating a contract between future parents and future children *before* the children are conceived and born.**

This brings me to the last point for now: it is not enough to make a contract between a man and a woman in the formation of a marriage and a household into which you bring children. It takes more than two people to create a child: it takes three—mother, father and the child/ children. They should be considered from the beginning. There *must be* a contract drawn with the future children also. Mutual love, sexual attraction and respect between the adults made it possible for them to be conceived, born and grow, but the end of the love, attraction and respect between their parents, which leads to the end of the adult contract, must not be the end of the contract with the children. In

a pre-nuptial agreement between adults getting married but there also needs to be an agreement between the adults getting married about their unborn children.

Agreement on custody and maintenance after divorce is not enough to address the full range of human reality. The divorce agreement is created *after* the love that created the family is gone. I strongly recommend the creation of a contract between future parents and future children to be created *before* the children are conceived and born, when the love that creates the family union is at its peak: to agree what will be the relationship between parents and the future children in the event of separation. This is a necessary standard of human rights, in my view.

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