



Trial & Error

An inflexible ex: you and the children

By Stacy D. Phillips

If you're a divorced person having a contentious relationship with your ex, be ever so careful you don't let it impact the mental well-being of the children you are parenting together.

Unfortunately, children are almost always victims when it comes to divorce. They are helpless victims who love both parents — and the last thing they need is to feel tension and acrimony between the two people they love the most. Nor should they need to feel they must choose one parent over the other. I find most couples are so caught up in their anger, need for control and bitterness, they don't realize how their behavior (their unkind words and actions toward one another) affects their children, who often feel they must pit one parent against the other.

Whenever I speak with children of parents involved in a custody battle, or caught between mom and dad fighting over visitation matters, I feel a tremendous sadness. I wish parents could walk in their children's shoes during one of these inappropriate incidents. Only then could they feel the stress and discomfort their children experience.

I have a checklist of what I consider appropriate boundaries for parents who can't agree or get along with one another. I take as much time as necessary with my clients in helping them plan how they will handle difficult moments with their ex, especially in situations directly affecting their children.

The following are my suggestions for helping children through post-traumatic divorce stress:

1. NEVER bad-mouth your ex in front of the children. Despite what a louse you may think your ex is, she/he is still your child's parent. It's traumatic for a child to hear one parent berate the other. Psychologists and marriage-family counselors tell us children instinctively feel if something is wrong with one or the other parent, then something must be wrong with them. Save your angry remarks for your therapist, or vent

Psychologists & Marriage-Family Counselors tell us children instinctively feel if something is wrong with one parent, then something must be wrong with them.

your feelings and opinions to a trusted friend.

2. NEVER argue in front of the children. They tend to feel anxious, embarrassed and feel torn between their allegiance to each parent.

3. Work out schedules and important arrangements ahead of time. That is — well in advance so there will be no confusion or uncertainty for the children. Make sure specific, agreed upon visitation times are in writing. This way you can justifiably take your complaints to your attorney, a court mediator or a judge. Better to take your grievances there than to display them to your ex in front of the children. If your ex is tough to deal with he/she may not be the type with whom you can have an open-ended relationship

when it comes to matters that focus on the children.

If your children are noticeably uncomfortable when you encounter your ex, encourage them to talk about their feelings and offer them the support of a therapist. Often children need an outside advocate to help them deal with their polarized or uncomfortable feelings about mom and dad.

6. If tensions are high between you and your ex spouse, seek assistance. Arrange to have children dropped off and picked up at the home or office of a neutral party if the need arises. Sometimes it's better for children not to be in the company of both parents if the vibes are bad. This solution gives children, you and your ex less time to stir up negative feelings.

As a loving parent, you want to protect the peace of mind and well-being of your children. Being the bigger person — whether it applies to being more flexible with the visitation schedule or biting your tongue in front of the children when you want to sound off at what you think is unfair, will pay more dividends in the long run. Another perk: You'll take great pride in showing your ex that he/she can no longer push your buttons. **W**

Stacy D. Phillips is a founding partner of Phillips, Lerner & Lauzon, LLP. She specializes in family law. 2029 Century Park East Los Angeles, California (310) 277-7117 email: sphillips@plllaw.com