

## Resources/References

1. Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW— [www.yoursocialworker.com](http://www.yoursocialworker.com)
2. National Network for Child Care—[www.nncc.org](http://www.nncc.org)
3. What Parents Can Do to Help Children with Divorce, Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran, Ph.D. [www.meditate.com](http://www.meditate.com)  
[www.infidelity.com](http://www.infidelity.com)
4. Channing Bete publications: Co-parenting Topics
5. [www.supreme.state.az.us](http://www.supreme.state.az.us)
6. A Parental Guide to Making Child-Focused Parenting Time Decisions, adapted for use by North Dakota Child Protection Services

*Special thanks to the parents, step parents and grandparents who shared their insights on the struggles children experience during and after divorce. You were a valuable resource!*

For more information on parenting support groups and parent education, contact: [pcand@btinet.net](mailto:pcand@btinet.net) or call Prevent Child Abuse North Dakota at 1-800-403-9932.



[www.StopChildAbuseND.com](http://www.StopChildAbuseND.com)

Contact the Alliance for Children's Justice at:

Prevent Child Abuse North Dakota  
Bismarck/Mandan—223-9052  
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## *Keeping Your Children Out of the Crossfire*

How to recognize and prevent negative effects of divorce, custody battles, and parent adversity on your children



*Alliance for Children's Justice*

**Divorce or separation of a child's parental figures is a traumatic time for all those involved, but can be especially difficult for children.** Children describe the loss of contact with a parent as the worst consequence of divorce or parental separation. Separating adults should remember a time when they were children and how their safety, security, and self-acceptance evolved around their parent figures. As children they may also remember the importance of the loving, supportive role offered them unconditionally by caring parents.



**Many of the following suggestions may not apply to divorcing/ separating parents experiencing alcohol or drug abuse, domestic violence, or physical, sexual, or emotional abuse within the family. Professionals or a prescribed treatment program must address these matters appropriately before custody arrangements can be finalized.**

**Grandparents should be consistent in following the rules of the parents' household when in charge of grandchildren.**

The support of loving family members contributes to the children's well being; however, children need structure and boundaries to develop a sense of security and self worth. Discipline should never be physical punishment and should follow the techniques used day to day in the child's home, i.e. pre-determined consequences for certain behaviors. Children should never be tempted to use grandparents or other extended family members as an escape from their household responsibilities or consequences from a mis-deed. Family members must support the parents' rules and strategies for raising their children in a non-violent environment.



- Be that special someone that helps a child get through a difficult time in his or her life.
- Be supportive of the parents' efforts to work through this difficult time in their own lives.
- Don't blame your child, the ex-spouse, or the children for the divorce. Try to be the neutral party and help the children adjust to the new situation.
- Show respect to both parents with regards to spending time with the grandchildren. Both parents need to be informed of where their children are at all times.

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## Loving Arms of the Extended Family

**One of the most serious consequences of divorce is a child's sense of insecurity at the separation of his parents and/or other extended family members.** Who will take care of them if something happens to the custodial parent? Who will take them and pick them up from school, church or other activities when they are visiting the non-custodial parent?



Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other close family members who are caring and don't allow the impending divorce to tarnish their relationship with the children should be encouraged to remain as active as possible during and after the divorce. Extended family should follow the same rules as the parents regarding negative comments about the other parent. Children need to know that grandparents love them unconditionally and will be there for them no matter what is happening in their family.

*Always remember that children don't cause divorces ... adults make that decision.  
Don't blame the children for the parents' decision.*

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**The ND Alliance for Children's Justice is providing this guide for all parents who are considering or have separated or divorced and have children.** The goal for publishing this information is to alert parents to the devastating effects on children that their attitudes and behaviors toward one another may have. This publication will also give you examples of what to do and not to do regarding helping your children adjust to the new and different family situation. You may think your situation is unique and that you won't allow any emotional harm to come to your children. You may believe that the other parent is at fault and caused the divorce or separation. Keep in mind that these feelings belong in the adult part of your relationship and that your children don't own these problems.

- **Children require strong and competent adults to place their needs first.**
- **Most children are not emotionally or intellectually capable of understanding the complexities of adult relationships, marriage, or divorce.**
- **Children are self-involved, so may often believe the anger, resentment, and criticism is directed at them and that they are at fault.**
- **Anything you say or do to undermine the other parent or their authority only further confuses your child and may result in your child having no respect or trust for any person of authority, including you.**

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## Keep the Kids Out of the Middle

**Parents can keep their children out of the middle of adult issues by not using the children as messengers.** We all know what happens to messengers. Parents must deal directly with each other or through a mutually agreed-upon adult when issues arise. If the message is difficult for one parent to say directly to another, just imagine how difficult it is for the child to relay that message. Avoid statements such as, *“Tell your father we don’t have enough money for school clothes.”*



**Don’t ask your children to report about what is going on in the life of the other parent.** Any time children are asked to divide their loyalty, or to betray one parent to another, the children feel guilty or as if they are being asked to stop loving one parent. Parents should limit their discussions with their children to an interest in the lives of the children and how the children are feeling. Avoid statements such as, *“Does your mother have a boyfriend?”*

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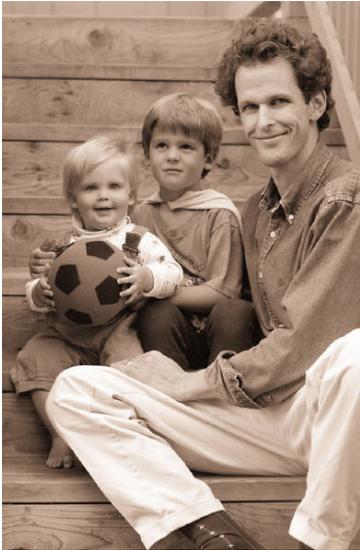
**If you share custody, focus on the quality of time spent with your children rather than quantity.** Meaningfulness of time together, not amount of time, will determine each parent’s lifelong relationship with their children. Quality of time to the child is determined by how well each parent protects them from parental conflict and how each parent participates in matters of concern to the child, such as sports games and school events. Try using statements like, *“I know this is not my weekend to have you at my house, but I’m anxious to come to your soccer game on Saturday.”*



**Parents must learn to be flexible with each other to determine how to best support their children according to the children’s needs and activities.** Your children should never miss an event because they are supposed to be with one parent or the other. Extra-curricular activities should not be used as weapons to exclude the other parent but as a structure to organize each parent’s time with their children. Parent and child should use their time together to focus on enjoying each other’s company, building their relationship, and creating lasting memories to get them through the times spent apart. Avoid statements such as, *“I’m not spending any money for you to do this; that’s why I give your mother child support.”*

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## What Parents Can Do to Help...



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**Never attack or put down the other parent to your children.** Children identify with both parents. If one parent is putting down the other parent, the child will feel as if they are also being put down by their parent. Avoid statements such as, *“Your father is too lazy to clean his house.”*

**Encourage your child’s relationship with the other parent.** Too often, the child can become the battleground over which the parents fight. Never begrudge your children’s relationship with their other parent. Rather, encourage them to call and visit the other parent and never be a hindrance to their time spent together. Avoid statements such as, *“When you’re with me you can’t be calling your mother.”*

**Both parents must realize that issues of children’s distress is a consequence of the structural situation in which the children live.**

The parents should not blame each other solely as the cause of the child’s distress, as these feelings only work to heighten and intensify the child’s overall distress. Avoid statements such as, *“Your father wanted to move out. It wasn’t my idea.”*

**Tone down the rhetoric.** Parents need to avoid statements that are hurtful to the other parent and spare their children the emotional intensity and toxicity of their own feelings. Avoid statements such as, *“Your mother cares more about her job than you kids.”*

**Consider therapy or another safe outlet for your children to address their emotional feelings and concerns with a trusted, neutral adult.**



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## Negative Effects of Parental Adversity on Children



**Children are dependent upon both their parents for safety, love, and security.** Children can often suffer anxiety if they feel that a parent's well-being is threatened. If one parent is continuously referred to as being "bad" by the other parent, the child wonders how the "bad" parent will be able to care for him/her.

**Children form their own identity in relation to both their parents.** Encountering feelings that one parent is "bad" runs the risk of sending the psychological message that the child is therefore half-bad. This can undermine the child's identity and self-worth.

**Parental stress is experienced first-hand by children.** The child's reactionary distress may take the forms of school-related problems, anxiety, depression, bullying, victimization, and even physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches.

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## Be Careful to Be a Grown-Up

Some parents may respond to divorce with a sense of renewed freedom. This can provide an opportunity for growth and change, or it can be a time of regression and irresponsibility. **Make sure you are acting like a grown-up both during the separation and after the divorce is final.** Monitor your behavior and the behavior of others you expose your children to.

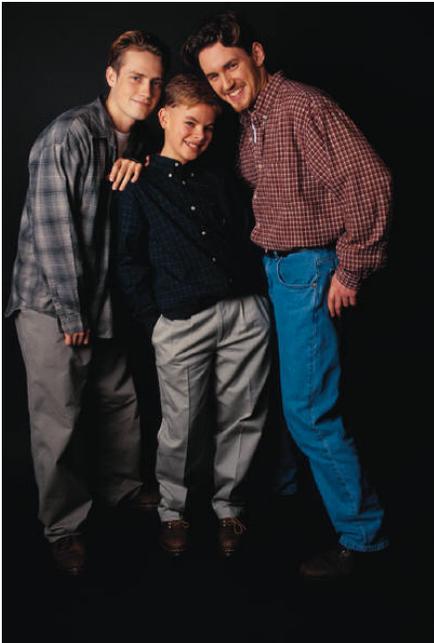
- Be careful to keep your dating outside of the children's lives until you have a serious long-term partner.
- Don't introduce your children to partner after partner. Dating may be fun for you, but it can be confusing to your children.
- Watch any resurgence of your "adolescent self". If promiscuity, risk taking, or irresponsible behavior surface, seek consultation and guidance from your mature friends and family.
- Be careful not to become engaged or remarried too soon. Take time to recover from your divorce and reassess what type of person you want in your and your children's lives going forward. Always consider how a potential new partner feels about your parenting and financial commitment to your children.
- Be aware of safety issues when bringing new people into your home. Always be around to supervise your children when they spend time with a significant other or friend of yours. Pay attention to how your children react to a potential parental figure. Be alert to any uneasy feeling you or your children may be having during these times together.

**Do Not Endanger Your Children Because of Your Relationship Needs.**

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## Fourteen to Eighteen Years

- This age group may resist a rigid or well-defined access schedule. Parents should be flexible and accept the children's increasing ability to care for their own needs. Many older teens prefer a primary house to use as a base where friends can contact them. **Curfews and rules should be the same at both homes with the same level of enforcement and consequences.** Teens this age will often want to spend more time with the more permissive parent. This isn't in the best interest of the child or the parents who expect the children to behave in a safe and disciplined manner.
- Parents should consult with their older teens to determine living arrangements, access schedules, and family activities. However, parents must remind their teens that final decisions rest with the parents.



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## Your children need your financial support.

Child support, which is a legal obligation, should not be a source of friction between parents. Both parents should share basic housing expenses, medical and dental costs, education, extra-curricular activities, clothing, child care and other affordable expenses that enhance their child's well being.

Children don't understand the financial sacrifices parents may make in an effort to give them the same opportunities other children have. Therefore, complaining to the children about your financial commitment is not appropriate. Loving and caring parents fulfill their obligation and don't create unnecessary insecurity in their kids around money issues. Any support you give the custodial parent for your children should not have conditions or strings attached. The behavior and attitudes you model regarding financial support will send powerful messages to your children. Hopefully those messages will be positive and responsible.



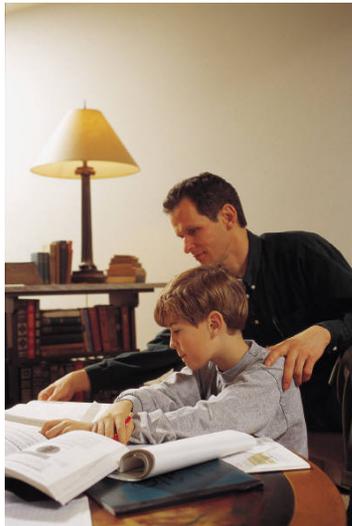
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## Effective Co-Parenting

**Children generally fare best when they have the emotional support, understanding, and consistent involvement of both parents.**

Ongoing positive parental involvement fosters strong parent-child relationships and healthy emotional and social development.

**All children with separated parents are subject to and affected by the stress and anger that these parents often direct at each other.** Children may be subject to parental pressures to align with one parent or even asked to outright choose one parent over the other. Children who experience ongoing conflict between parents are at high risk for suffering serious long-term emotional problems.



**Commitments and promises to your child are paramount in building a trusting and respectful relationship.** Frequent or unexpected cancellations or no-shows for planned time together give your child the message that your plans are more important to you than they are. Keep your promises. If you must cancel your time together, let your child know when you will see them and apologize for the change, reminding them that you love them and don't like to disappoint them.

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### Six to Nine Years

- At this age the child may worry that one parent does not love them or that they will lose one parent. It is common for these children to fantasize that their parents will get back together.
- All scheduling should maximize parents' time off from work. If work schedules change, parents may vary access days with appropriate prior notice.



### Ten to Thirteen Years

- This age group often wants to be independent from their parents and is becoming more attached to their friends. They may blame one parent for the divorce, may be angry and embarrassed by the breakup of the family, and may side with one parent.
- Children this age often want to have a say in their living arrangements. Parents should allow them to express their views, while making it clear it is up to the parents to make the final decisions. As children begin junior high school, parents should give consideration to their school and extracurricular activities. Parents should be flexible. Remember that access must still occur on a regular basis.

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### **Twenty-four to Thirty-six Months**

- Although children at this age are learning to be independent, they may still cling to their caregiver and resist separation. They may say “no” to parents’ requests just to express their independence.
- Predictable, regularly schedule routines help children manage their fears and help them learn that the world is a safe place.
- Moving between parents’ homes may be difficult for this age, so parents must ensure that the transitions between the two parents’ homes are free of parental arguing and tension.

### **Three to Five Years**

- This age may show discomfort when moving between parents’ homes. They may also develop fears like “monsters” under the bed. Again, parents should be civil toward one another and not argue at the exchange. Children of this age sense tension and may become difficult to manage or show behaviors that are consistent with emotional problems.
- Parents must not use the child as a messenger to communicate with the other parent.
- Allow this age to take a favorite belonging that will remind them of the other parent.
- Communication with the other parent should be encouraged and facilitated.



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**Angry or resentful parents may not want their children to spend time with the other parent and try to create problems to prevent access.** Each parent may have their own style of parenting and it’s important to be flexible within the boundaries of the divorce decree. Just because the other parent makes parenting decisions that are not always optimal does not necessarily mean those decisions constitute abuse or neglect. Reporting child abuse, sexual abuse or neglect to authorities when abuse is not taking place is damaging to you, your child and the reported parent. It is also against the law. If you have concerns about abuse or neglect, contact your county social service office and ask what constitutes abuse in this state. If your concerns are not considered child abuse, be proactive in seeking parenting assistance for yourself and share with the other parent what is available for parenting resources. It is the responsible and wise parent who seeks help during challenging parenting times. If your child seems especially troubled, family counseling is often recommended.

*Do not use your children as a weapon to get back at their other parent.*



**Parenting resources are listed at the end of this booklet.**

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## How Do We Arrange Visitation Schedules to Promote Attachment? (Based on the Children's Ages and Developmental Needs)

Children differ in how long they are comfortable being away from each parent. Some children prefer spending more time at one home, while others move back and forth on a regular basis with ease. Parents may need to tolerate disruption of their own schedule and more or less time with their children than they might otherwise prefer to provide children with a sense of security and well-being.

A portion of the following guidelines were developed by a statewide committee located in the state of Arizona after consulting with nationally known experts on child development and reviewing the current research around this topic, and should be considered when setting up visitation schedules that are appropriate for the child(ren).



**These guidelines may not be appropriate for families who have experienced child abuse and neglect, mental and emotional disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, criminal activity, domestic violence, or continuous levels of intense conflict.**

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### Birth to Twelve Months

- Infants cannot retain experiences over time, so it is important that they have frequent contact with both parents and a predictable schedule and routine. However, infants can retain “emotional memories” of conflict that can have long-term negative effects, so parents should not argue when children, even infants, can overhear.
- At this young age, it is important to maintain the infant’s basic sleep, feeding, and waking cycles. Schedules should be adjusted so that disruption does not occur.



### Twelve to Twenty-four Months

- A child of this age can be attached to many caregivers including grandparents, other extended family members, daycare providers, babysitters and family friends who are in frequent contact with the child. Regular sleeping and eating schedules are still important and should be consistent in both homes.
- Two year olds commonly test parental limits and appropriate parental responses can build the child’s self-esteem for years to come.
- Transitions between homes may become difficult for some one to two year-olds and they may become upset at these times. Some resistance to exchanges is normal for some children. This behavior does not necessarily mean that the other parent is not a good parent or that the child does not want to be with the other parent. Parents can make exchanges easier for the child by following predicable schedules and by supporting the child’s relationship with the other parent.