

HEROIC PARENTING

Choose to love your children more than you hate your ex

BY MICHELE LOWRANCE



“I love my children. I would never do anything to hurt them.” Is the phrase I invariably hear from parents in my courtroom. And yet...



Two out of three children from divorced families as adults have decided not to have children of their own according to Dr. Judith S. Wallerstein's long-term studies. (Wallerstein, Judith, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, p. 67.) The reasons given range from, "They would not want to be the kind of parent they had," to "If their marriage ended in divorce, their children might go through the same horrible experience they had." Since divorce now occurs in 50 percent

of American families, we must ask ourselves what is wrong with this alarming picture? Why are so many children emotionally harmed when their parents divorce—even when their loving parents mean so well?

These studies and my own observations confirm a perilous disconnect between parents' hearts and their behaviors. This incongruity during the divorce process, and even after, may well account for this disturbing trend. Parents, who

have always protected their children in the past, have the illusion that their children will somehow automatically be protected by their parental love, even during a heated divorce. Yes, parents' good intentions may not have changed during the divorce, but their ability to carry out those intentions may have.

During divorce, parents are so consumed with their own conflicts and problems that they retreat into survival mode. They necessarily believe that even if their actions and words cause damage to their children, children are ultimately resilient and will get over it with time. This has turned out to be all too often not true. However, this myth serves a useful function of minimizing the children's fragility, because the parents must focus on their own survival. The unintentional damage that loving parents cause their children seems inevitable because few parents have the knowledge and practical skills to parent in a crisis. Throughout a difficult divorce, parents' unbridled emotions almost always put their children in the line of fire.

"Is there anything I am doing or not doing that could be harmful to my children?" This should be the paramount question in any divorce. After fourteen years on the bench, I have found the only antidote to this damage is nothing short of heroic parenting.

Free speech does not apply to parenting

Your children know that they are a combination of both parents. When one parent hates or maligns the other, a child might believe he or she too is hated—at least in part. They wonder if those negative and unlovable traits the other parent has, they may also have. If there is an inference that one parent is bad, what skills do you believe your children possess to accurately process this information? By destroying the child's loving attachment to the other parent, you are interrupting the child's ability to feel confident in the love and care of the other parent.

The essential question is do you want your children to view the other parent—and thus part of themselves—as ineffectual, damaged, or incompetent because of your hostility or criticism? The safer and stronger both parents appear to the child, the more secure and protected your child will feel. Although in a confrontational situation, holding one's tongue for a moment can seem like an eternity, in

that moment of self-control when you resist harmful speech, you have reinforced your child's ability to feel safe in the world.

An atmosphere of criticism and hostility between the parents causes a child to worry and be fearful. It robs the child of the untroubled pleasures of childhood. The simple loss of carefree playtime or dreams riddled with anxiety are soul crushing for a child who is endlessly preoccupied with questions of whether one or both parents are "bad guys."

Your version of "the truth"

I have heard parents say, "I believe my child should know the truth about his or her mother or father." Truth can be as abusive as the introduction of falsehood. In court, I ask the truth teller, "Which do you think is more important, your child's knowing the truth as you see it or your child's happiness?" In the name of truth, one parent can grind down the positive attachment a child may have with the other parent. If the maligning parent is successful, he or she may have succeeded in destroying the child's ability to have positive attachments later in life.

When a child feels that a parent's love is contingent on the child accepting the parent's negative view of the other parent—the lesson learned is that love is conditional. Later in life, that child may believe that a mate's love comes with a similar price tag.

Even if you believe there are challenging negative qualities about the other parent, emphasize the positive aspects of them to your child. When you feel the urge to tell a negative "truth" to your child about the other parent, first ask yourself...does my child really need to know this and will this truth hurt my child in any way?

Angry parents

When I see angry parents battling it out in my courtroom, I can't imagine where they will find the emotional reserves

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needed to support their children throughout this difficult process. When a parent is frequently angry, the child may feel the loss of the parent he or she knew before the divorce. Children usually cannot articulate what is different about the parent; they just know something is very wrong. The momentary discomfort of not letting your emotions determine what you say or do in front of your children will save them years of torment, and yourself years of guilt. In the snap of an irate tongue, you can detrimentally change the course of your child's life. Often parents believe they are justified in their anger toward the other parent because of

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perceived wrongs done to the child. Ultimately, the reasons for anger don't really matter, because no matter what they are, the child internalizes and carries within the destructive hostility of the parent. The parents tell me they are holding the anger for the sake of their children, but the reality is the children are paying the price on behalf of the parents.

Because many children consider a divorce their fault, it follows that many children will naturally consider your agitations as their fault as well. If you are angry with your spouse, tell anyone other than your child. Likewise, never malign the other parent in front of your children's friends, the friends' parents, coaches, teachers, grandparents, or neighbors.

Children blame themselves

Developmentally, children see themselves as responsible for most events in their lives, including your divorce. Without a lot of reassurance to the contrary, it is inescapable that a child will internalize the blame. The child's understanding is limited by this immature brain development. I've come to believe that "the speech" to the children about your divorce may be the most important one you ever give. Research it and rehearse it. There is no minimizing the value of retelling your children why none of it is their fault. These speeches should never include facts that would be harmful to them.

Loyalty and betrayal

Avoid questioning your children about what occurred during visitation with the other parent, unless you are concerned that a crime has been committed. Often children are frightened that if they enjoyed their time with one parent they are betraying the other parent. This question of loyalty should not require children to have to improvise how to handle parents on every, or any, visitation. A child should not be required to keep two sets of books. Sooner or later it may affect their self-esteem if they perceive their own actions to be a breach of loyalty toward either parent.

No matter how you might feel about the other parent, encourage your children to have a positive relationship with that parent. Do this not only verbally but in your nonverbal attitude as well. Be supportive when your children talk about shared experiences with the other parent. Asking questions about what occurred or how the child felt about the visitation may trigger a child's feelings of disloyalty.

Do not put your children in the position of having to keep secrets from the other parent. Secrets make a child fearful that disclosing something or failing to disclose something will jeopardize a parent's love.

Time well spent

There are many worries for you during your divorce, don't burden your children with your worries or concerns about the other parent. It is also not advisable to share with them financial, custodial or visitation concerns. Your children are not your therapists. To promote good emotional development, childhood should be as care-free as possible.

Spending one-on-one time with your child is vital. Children need more one-on-one time than they did when the family was intact. There is much they will talk about when no one else is around. Get to know your child better throughout this process.

Explain to your child that life sometimes presents difficulties, but that together you can work through them. Show your child, by example, how to manage conflict and disappointment. A child is soft modeling clay, and imprints become indelible. Your child will be watching your every move. Use this difficult time as a life-defining teachable moment.

Unfortunately, you are now in a position to have to take a crash course in parenting under pressure. Learn as much as you can about becoming a better parent. Because none of us really knows how to fully protect our children in divorce. Read parenting books and magazines; talk to attorneys, experts, and teachers; go online and create support groups. Heroic parenting requires you to go the extra mile in navigating these turbulent waters. **FA**

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