

VILLANI &
DELUCA

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE



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About the Author

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If you or a loved one is contemplating a divorce in New Jersey, contact Vincent today at (888) 389-9533 or email Vincent at vcdeluca@VillaniDeLuca.com. You may also visit VillaniDeLuca.com for more information.

Disclaimer

Vincent DeLuca is not a therapist and does not purport to give medical advice. The opinions contained in this book are based on published therapy literature. Mr. DeLuca is not purporting to give specific legal advice either. This book is intended to be a source of general information about children and divorce. Please do not construe anything in this book to be legal advice about your legal case, as each legal case is different, and an attorney can give you quality legal advice only after he understands the facts of your particular case.

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Contents

About the Author	1
Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1: Breaking the News	5
Chapter 2: Adapting to Two Homes.....	7
Chapter 3: Dealing with Loyalty Conflicts & Blame.....	10
Chapter 4: Helping Children Cope with Divided Holidays.....	14
Chapter 5: Incorporating a Family Therapist.....	17
Chapter 6: Divorce's Effect on Your Child's Education.....	20
Chapter 7: Handling an Uncooperative Parenting Partner	22
Epilogue	24

Introduction

Divorce is a difficult time and an arduous experience. The termination of a bond that was supposed to last forever is going to be taxing, mentally and emotionally, and the amount at stake in the proceedings, financially and otherwise, can make it an easy time to consider your own needs first. There is one party, however, that had no say in initiating the separation, and who will not have a seat at the negotiating table: your children.

A divorce does not mean that you cannot be a tremendous parent. Being separated from your spouse does not mean that you can't do a terrific job raising your child or love them as strongly as you would if you were still one family. If you remain as committed to focusing on the needs of your children no matter what, there is no reason that your divorce should keep you from being the best parent you can be. The extra time, commitment, and effort necessary to do this may go unrecognized by others, but you will know that you provided your son or daughter with the best childhood you could.

Divorce is going to change your kids' lives drastically. There is no avoiding that, unfortunately. The goal, hopefully, is to minimize the negative toll it will take on them, and to create an environment that will allow the children to form a healthy relationship with both parents. It's going to take teamwork, communication and commitment from both parents, even if a lack of these by either or both parties was the cause of the divorce. Placing blame has to end; anger cannot be allowed to boil over. With the decision made to end the marriage, you have to turn your focus to the one joint venture you and your ex will have forever- parenthood.

Many of the issues and solutions that will be discussed in the following chapters are going to center on some things that might be difficult for separated couples to do with each other. Much of the work that needs to be done on the child's behalf is going to require teamwork and coordination, and regular, effective communication between both parents. That communication, in today's technological era, can accommodate ex-spouses who are unable to speak to each other without arguing. Texting, emails and any of a number of other non-verbal forms of communication can allow either parent to lay out



the message they need to convey to the other without the added stress of a face to face confrontation. If this sounds similar to the situation you find yourself in, I strongly suggest you try to embrace these forms of communication. Reducing the number of arguments will reduce the tension for all parties involved, and will certainly benefit the children.

Therapy is often thought of as a last resort when children are having a hard time dealing with the divorce. I encourage you not to consider it as such. Enrolling your child for therapy early in the divorce process can provide them with an opportunity to talk with someone free of pressure, with the liberty to express whatever emotions they want. It may prove a valuable tool in aiding your kids during this trying time. In addition to any helpful hints you may take away from reading this, considering therapy sessions early may be the most important.



Chapter 1: Breaking the News

Once you and your spouse have decided to end the marriage, there are several issues to face. The entire divorce process can be upsetting, regardless of whether or not it was a mutual decision. The life you had together is at an end, but for those of you with children, there is still one duty you need to undertake as a united parental unit - telling your children of the impending divorce proceedings. It is best to seek out a trained therapist to help you with this process.

Younger children will be confused and frightened: where is Daddy going to live? Where is Mommy going to live? Where am I going to live? They will ask these questions straight out, bluntly, at times, because they are trying to regain a sense of control over a situation that they cannot truly comprehend. Young children will be concerned with how their daily rituals will change- who will make their lunch, give them their bath, tuck them in at night. The most important thing you can do is constantly reassure them that Mommy and Daddy still love them very much and that will never change.

Older children, who have more of a concept of what divorce means, may ask harder questions. They may question you about child support, custody, vacation times, and things that you may at first feel are not their business. Be careful not to snap at them, and try to give them honest answers to their questions, even if you don't know the answer for sure yet. It is acceptable to say things like "the lawyers are still working that out" or "I am not sure yet, but I will bring it up with your mother/father at our next discussion." While young children may seem more fearful, older children may come across as angry or resentful, especially with the parent that they are living with most of the time. They may feel that one parent has pushed the other away or may feel abandoned by the parent who left.

With both age groups, it is important to remind the children that the divorce is not their fault. Your family therapist can help with this. Try to remain calm and patient while you explain the reasons behind the divorce. While children may not need to know all the details, it is important that they have enough information to understand that they are not at fault. Additionally, you have to, right from the start, put to rest their daydreams of you and your spouse reuniting. It is natural for them to have that wish, even if it is not verbally



expressed, and they may even try to get the two of you back together. Make sure you once again explain, in a patient and loving way, that the divorce will be final.

All of these conversations should involve both parents and your family therapist as much as possible. They have to understand that as far as parental decisions go, you and your spouse are a united front. This will also help them to see that the love you both have for your children has not been changed by the decision to divorce. Additionally, it may lessen their impulses to try and circumvent one parent when they want something and go to who they perceive to be the more sympathetic parent. Allow them to see that you will still talk together as a family when it comes to decisions that will affect your children. A joint session with your family therapist can help with this.

When they start to ask about custody or living arrangements or how often they will see the other parent, ask them to speak freely about what they want and how they see the situation working best. Address their concerns with your attorney and talk about the different types of custody and visitation arrangements that can be established at the divorce hearing. It is important to keep your children's feelings in mind when you set up schedules that will, for the most part, dictate how and where and when they see their parents for the rest of their childhood. Listen to what they have to say and do not reject their emotions.

In essence, the most important thing to keep doing is to assure them of your love for them and that it is unchanging. Your family therapist can help you navigate the emotional hurdles of divorce, while your lawyer can help with the legal hurdles. By addressing the emotional hurdles early in the process, you will be better able to make decisions that benefit you and your children in the long-term.

Chapter 2: Adapting to Two Homes

One of the biggest challenges facing children after the divorce of their parents is getting used to the change in living arrangements. With their parents now living in separate homes, they are forced to adapt to no longer being able to talk to, ask questions or seek comfort from either one of their parents at any given time. A poor grade on a test at school and a bad Little League game can both be stressful for your kids, but the separate households can exacerbate the problem. If your child prefers to discuss baseball games with his father or his school work with his mother, but is in the other parent's care on that particular day, it can complicate an already difficult situation. There are several things you can do to help your son or daughter adjust to the new situation with as much ease and comfort as possible, which is extremely important to ensure the child still feels as though they are home.

One of the first keys to creating a successful two home environment for your children is to ensure that the situation entails just that- two homes. A risk of this living arrangement is that a child may feel that, rather than living in two places, they have no true home at all. Children are most likely to succeed when engaged in a daily, structured routine, and the upheaval of this as a result of your divorce can create difficulties for them. Make sure that the child has their own space in each of the two living quarters, both tailored to their age and interests. Try to create an environment that does not leave the child feeling as though they are only 'visiting', or stopping by for the weekend. While it may not always be logistically possible to keep two full sets of clothing at each house, try to prevent extensive packing just to transfer your child from one home to the other.



Another key to helping kids thrive in this difficult transition is flexibility. Being flexible with your time with the child is by no means easy and is going to require communication and coordination between the two parents. While giving up or changing the time that you will be spending with your children may not be simple or convenient, it is important to remember that your first and most important responsibility is to your children, not yourself. As children get older, they develop their own schedules and obligations, most of which cannot be tailored to fit around custody arrangements. Sports teams, school commitments, and potentially jobs are going to require some changes to be made to the routine you may have set up. Allowing them to not only start but continue these activities throughout their youth is important to their development. It is equally important that, despite

whatever difficulties driving them back across town to soccer practice may cause, they do not feel as though they are burdening you.

Another form of flexibility that will probably be important while adjusting to living with separated parents is the willingness to allow your child to contact the other parent during your custody period if they wish to do so. New technology like cell phones and social media give us more ways than ever to interact with people we can't always be with. When it allows your kids to reach out to you when they're staying with your ex, it can feel like a blessing. When the shoe is on the other foot, and your former spouse is talking to your children during what is supposed to be your time together, it can feel like an unwelcome intrusion. While you may feel offended or upset that your child is not directing enough of their attention to you during your time together, it's important to remember how differently young people communicate compared to past generations. Kids text continuously, at all hours of the day, to any number of friends or family. A conversation that was started with your child's other parent may be extremely important to them, and they might not want to wait a week to continue it. So long as your parenting counterpart honors the children's wishes when the roles are reversed, it is best to honor your kids' wishes and allow them the freedom to communicate with both of their parents as often as they like. If it ever starts to bother you, it may help to recall that there are far worse people your children could be conversing with on the phone than their parents!

Another important component in creating two suitable homes for your children after your divorce is making certain that the rules the children must follow are the same at both houses. Despite the problems that led to the end of your marriage, it is extremely important to communicate with your ex-spouse in regards to this. Obviously, examples of this are going to change as the child grows older. At younger ages, how much time after school should be committed to school work and how much can be devoted to television or computer can be a point of contention. If the father is allowing more leisure time after school or does not monitor the amount of video games the kids play while they are staying with him, it could undermine the rules that are put in place at mom's house. As the children enter their teen years, things such as curfews and which friends' houses they are allowed to hang out at are other issues that need to be sorted out and agreed upon by both parents. Any exceptions made to these rules should be discussed by the mother and father to prevent either side from accusing the other of allowing extra liberties.

Likewise, a punishment put in place by one parent should ideally be upheld by the other. If your son or daughter is grounded by your ex before they arrive to stay with you, you would be best served to hold the same line. If you disagree with the severity of the punishment, discuss this with your former spouse at another time, separately from your child. The alternating households cannot become a place to escape the punishment of either the mother or the father. While relieving your son or daughter of the trouble they got in at their other

household may initially please them and make you feel like you are helping them, in the end it will only begin a game of back and forth, with your child learning to leverage each parent off the other.

Also, do not use your child as a means of communication between you and your former spouse. Do not make your kids responsible for passing along messages, especially those pertaining to who will be taking them where and when. Any communication of this nature should take place directly between the two parents, without involving your children. This avoids any potential of a message being lost in translation or simply forgotten, but more importantly it excludes the child from any disagreement that may arise between the two parents. Using kids as a go-between or messenger can needlessly involve them in discussions or arguments that they would be better suited not to be involved in at all.

Providing the same type of parenting you had planned to give your children had your marriage not ended can play a big part in helping them to cope with the divorce. The stability of keeping the guidelines they are expected to follow and the values you are trying to instill will maintain a sense of continuity in their life. They need to understand that while their life is going to be undergoing some major changes, the type of care you want for them and your expectations of them will remain the same. Communication between both parents, as was discussed, will play a key role in how well the child does adjusting to the changes in their lifestyle. An addendum to that is in front of the children, this communication should not include arguments. Do your best to present one message from both parents in your children's presence; hash out disagreements or arguments in an alternate time or place as often as possible.



Chapter 3: Dealing with Loyalty Conflicts & Blame

Marriages end under a multitude of circumstances. A large number of them do not end under amicable terms, with one or both of the parties walking away feeling hurt, offended, betrayed, and mostly, just plain angry. Interjecting parenthood and the necessity of continuing to raise your children into this situation will not automatically cause any of these feelings to dissipate. You will remain just as angry or upset with your ex, but with forced interaction. During this difficult time, you will certainly be looking for a place to vent, but there is one group of people who should never hear your negative thoughts about your former spouse: the kids. No matter how egregious the betrayal or marital failure, regardless of how poorly you feel they treated you, your feelings on your children's other parent must be kept private from them. This includes not just what you say directly to or about that parent to your children, but also how you treat each other in their presence. Children, no matter how young, can sense tension or aggression in your tone when you interact with your ex. Try to maintain a calm, level demeanor when talking to your parenting counterpart in front of the children.

Remember that, short of abuse or illegal activities, no matter what your spouse did or did not do to spur you towards divorce, they are still your child's parent. Their mother is still their mother, the most important woman in their young lives and somebody they are going to lean on heavily for emotional and moral support for a long time. Their father is still their superhero, somebody they want to hang out and play with, and a strong influence on their character well through their adult years. Good parenting after the divorce means allowing your ex to continue to play out that role for your children for so long as they want them to.



There is a good chance that your child will identify more with one of their parents than the other after the divorce. Often, they will find themselves more easily relating to the same-sex parent. This is natural, and should not curdle anger or fear in the other parent, as children who still live with both parents will often tend to identify or associate more easily with one parent than the other. However, in the case of divorced couples, parents must be especially careful not to discuss the negative portions of their relationship with their former spouse.

Divorced couples can argue or feud frequently. Raising these disagreements in front of the kids can leave them feeling like they have no choice but to choose one side over the other in these quarrels. No matter how strongly you feel about your point of view on the subject of the argument, bringing your child into the fray can only have a negative impact upon them. When you made the decision to divorce your partner, part of that agreement should have included your understanding that your children were going to form separate relationships with their mother and father. Trying to influence the kids' opinion of one another not only prevents them from making up their own minds on the topic, but it can also end up damaging your own relationship. Clouding their judgment by trying to sway them to your side of an argument may sour them to the way you talk about their mother or father; additionally, while they may feel compelled to agree with you at the time, they may also simply take your side out of fear of jeopardizing the relationship they have with you.

If the child is feeling especially insecure or uneasy after the divorce, you may find that, even unprovoked, they may align themselves firmly behind one parent and against another after the separation. This may be a reaction to ensure that, in the aftermath of your divorce and the child's upset household, they have at least one parent on their side. If you are the parent that finds yourself with the child planted firmly in his or her camp, you may find it difficult to turn away their support or affection. However, it is important that you thoroughly explain to them that you do not hate your ex, and nor are they solely to blame for the divorce. Encourage them not to cut off the connection with their other parent, and insist they give them a chance to prove that they will remain a good, strong parent for the kids despite the new arrangements.

It is extremely important to be aware of, and prepared to stave off, the early warning signs of the child trying to alienate one of their parents. The child can begin to speak in extremely negative terms about the parent at risk of being emotionally cut off, often with unreasonable or senseless cause. The child may express a dread to spend their allotted time with that parent, and may vocalize their blame for that party in the divorce. Phrases such as, "It's his fault we can't be together," or, "She left because she doesn't want to be here with us anyway," are major red flags that need to be addressed quickly. If you are truly committed to raising your children with both parents heavily involved in the process, then you need to strike down this kind of speech from your kids quickly and firmly. Reestablish the fact that the divorce came about because the mother and

father no longer wanted to be together, and not at all because either parent desired less time with the children. Ensure them that your former spouse does indeed love them and wants to see them as frequently as possible. Absolutely resist any urge to encourage these types of thoughts from your kids, or even tacitly approve them by not rebuking them immediately. Allowing them to persist could result in long term, major negative implications in the relationship between your child and the other parent.

Often, helping the child refrain from taking sides in a divorce can be influenced by how much about the divorce you decide to share with your child. Some children will have been exposed to their parents constant arguing leading up to the separation, and may already understand some of the reasons their mother and father cannot get along. Others may be very surprised by the news, and may require a bit more explanation. If, as a couple and as a set of parents, you decide to divulge any details as to why you will be splitting up, it is important that you draw the line of information at points that may compel the child to distribute blame. If, for example, infidelity was the cause or initial cause of the separation, you may choose to explain to your children that part of the reason you and your spouse were having such a hard time was trust issues, but do not explain to them any specific violations of trust. Arming a child with this information can give them the ammunition they need in their minds to place a large amount of blame and anger with one of their parents.



Most of what has been discussed here is much easier in theory than in practice. Divorce is a bitter process; tales of parents and spouses who separate under amicable terms are much less common than the opposite. Following many of the suggestions includes reaching a point where rational, reasonable, and constructive communication can be attained with the child's other parent. Often, a failure to communicate can be a large factor in the failure of the marriage in the first place. However, making sure the children involved in the divorce do not feel one parent is more to blame than the other is an essential part of helping them form strong, lasting relationships with their mother and father. Obviously, this is an important part of helping them deal most effectively with the divorce in the end.

Part of the solution to this problem is resolving to yourself that in the vast majority of divorce cases, no one side is blameless, and no party is completely responsible for the destruction of the marriage. The

separation was much more likely caused by numerous, small offenses, failings, disagreements, or just incompatibility. Harboring feelings of complete blame for your former partner will not only cause you anger and frustration, but may also spill over into your dealings with your children. Try to accept that you hold some responsibility for the failure of your own marriage. While this may do nothing to ease the tension of your relationship with your ex, it may make you less likely to be vindictive or to use the children against them in some way.



Chapter 4: Helping Children Cope with Divided Holidays

Often times, the prospect of facing the holiday season after your divorce can seem depressing. At a time when most people are gathering with their loved ones and celebrating with their family traditions, you are served with frequent reminders that your family has been separated. Trying to help children juggle the mixed emotions of enjoying the holidays with their divided family can be a major complication to what is an already difficult time. With proper planning and communication, you can give your kids the holidays and special events they deserve. Preserving these happy moments in your kids' childhoods, even amid the challenging changes they are facing, is an integral part of helping your children deal with your divorce in as positive a manner as possible.



Discussing the topic of holidays is probably a topic that will come up during your custody hearings. Often, alternating holidays and splitting time on the holidays are two of the options offered by either side, and each has pros and cons. The children's and parents' individual plans for the holidays take positive and negative effects, in addition to extended families who may wish to spend time with your children. With so many parties having an interest in how your kids spend their holidays, be sure that you take the time to find out which plan is going to make your child the happiest.

Alternating holidays allows the child to spend the full day in one place with one part of the family. It avoids a "clock-watching" scenario, where either the child can feel rushed while at one of the homes, or anxious about arriving at the other household on time or late. Not having the chance to see one parent or the other, however, on one of these special days could prove stressful as well. While it may feel like the better and especially more convenient option at the time, keeping kids from their mother or father during religious holidays, Thanksgiving, or other traditional family times may not be the route your children would prefer to take. While alternating holidays does not preclude the other parent from celebrating with their children on a day near the date of the holiday itself, oftentimes the child may want to spend time with both parents that day.

Splitting the holiday can prove difficult, but does allow for children to see both parents on special days. If this is the route you have decided to go, careful planning and an agreement to what times both parents will have that day is essential. After an agreement is made, you must adhere to it. If, for example, you have agreed

that you will have your kids Christmas morning, but they have to be at your ex's house by two, then 2:15 is not okay. Bringing a child late for an agreed time could lead to a heated conversation or extended argument that could upset your children and negatively affect their holiday. Sticking closely to the plan you and your parenting partner have set forth will help everyone keep calm and cool heads not only for this holiday, but in planning for those that will come after it.

Another important note for the holiday season: For those holidays that do involve gift giving, be sure to talk to your parenting counterpart about the types and prices of gifts that you each plan to purchase. Mothers and fathers, even those who are still married, can disagree as to which age children should get certain gifts. Certainly, for example, a scooter or dirt bike is a gift that should be agreed upon by both parents. Another much more common example could be the gift of a cell phone. Discussions like this should be had well in advance of the holiday, allowing plenty of time for any disagreements to be settled and some mutually agreeable terms reached. It is very important that gifts or holidays do not become one more reason for your children to watch their parents argue or fight; it is essential to make things as pleasant as possible, and to allow the kids to create the best holiday memories that they can.

Settling on an acceptable spending limit for the child from each parent can also work to stop some arguments before they start. A potential pitfall of birthday or holiday presents is the child's parents using them as a sort of escalating competition, or using these opportunities to vie for the child's affection through gift giving. In addition to potentially spoiling the child, this is also an example of using the child as an implement to strike back at your ex-spouse. As kids get older, they could potentially realize what is going on, and could be influenced or learn to leverage one parent off of the other. Try, alternatively, to take just the opposite tact. Inquire with genuine interest as to how your child and the other parent plan to spend their celebration of the holiday. If your child is excited or interested in it, offer to help them prepare for it. Offering to help them shop for a gift for their mother or father will not only help to show them the true meaning of unselfish gift giving, but could also provide them the opportunity to see their parents getting along despite their differences.

One option that should be considered by parents that may be extremely difficult for them, but perhaps best for the children, is spending your holidays together. Now, for sure, if you and your ex are not capable of spending a full day together without breaking into a bitter argument or a yelling match, then this option is not for you. However, if civility is not a problem in the relationship between you and your former spouse, this is certainly an option worth weighing. It allows the child to spend the special times with both parents, and also gives them the chance to see their mom and dad interacting in a positive way. As the years pass from the time of the divorce, this choice can become harder and harder to fulfill- new families are formed, new commitments

made. In the years and times that it is possible, though, allowing your children's holidays to pass as normally and happily as possible will help them cope with your divorce much more easily.

The logistics of handling the holiday itself is not the only thing you must pay close attention to around the holidays. As the first special days since the division of the child's home approaches, you may notice the child become more quiet and sad than normal. If your child is expressing these emotions, let them know that you understand how they are feeling, and express some of your own sadness as well. Explain to him or her that their emotions are normal, and that it is okay that they are having them. Encourage them to tell you why specifically they are feeling this way, and which parts of the holidays they will miss. When they tell you, tell them that while your time together may be different, you are going to try to continue as many of your traditions as possible. Tell your son or daughter that you can take advantage of this opportunity to develop new traditions and special moments that you can share in the future. Mostly, help them understand that even though the holidays will be different than before, that you still love them the same way and will feel the same joy in sharing the time with them.



Chapter 5: Incorporating a Family Therapist

Often, many of the strategies discussed in this book are not possible for many divorced couples. The large amount of coordination and cooperation is something that can be difficult or nearly impossible for divorced couples. Interactions could result in arguments or fighting, which will only further the emotional toll the divorce is already taking on your children. There are many steps that can be taken to help alleviate some of the stress associated with dealing with your ex for the child's benefit, but one of the most effective could be family counseling with a therapist.

While it may seem odd to incorporate a therapist after the failure of a marriage, it can be a major aid in helping to ensure that you provide the best environment possible for your children to be raised in. While the therapist won't be aiming to repair or mend the relationship between the two parents, you can set a goal of reducing the amount of tension, anger, and hostility felt towards one another so that these feelings will not interfere with how you handle parenthood. While the therapist should not be utilized as a mediator to settle your disputes, you should present some of your larger or more volatile disputes together. The therapist may not be able to solve them or help you agree on the proper course to take, but his main goal may be to help you understand each other's point of view, or at the very least show you how reaching a more peaceful way to negotiate these arguments could be beneficial to your child. He may find a way to illustrate to you how your continued marital troubles, despite the divorce, are negatively impacting the childhood development of your kids; often, seeing the tangible effects of how your actions have impacted your children can be a major catalyst towards improving the tone or nature of your relationship with your co-parent.

Along these lines, a therapist could be used to help you develop an effective plan for the shared parenthood. He or she may be able to help you come up with ways to handle the transportation of your child between homes without conflict, or help you reach decisions in parenting disputes that will be most beneficial to the child. Feuding couples may sometimes lose sight of what is best for the child being discussed, and may become more focused on winning the argument at hand. A trained therapist may be able to redirect that conversation back to the welfare of the child involved, and instruct the parents as to which course of action will benefit the child's development



the most.

For extreme cases where the two parents cannot interact in a civil manner, the utilization of therapy sessions with a shared professional might aid the parents in reaching what is known as a parallel parenting plan. With the therapist acting as a coordinator between the partners and children involved, they can help to ensure that the child is receiving proper care from both parents while also monitoring the message being delivered to the child on major parenting decisions. If your relationship with your former husband or wife is volatile to the point that cooperation is not an option, you may want to consider this as a form of "forced cooperation". It allows both parents to have an equal amount of input into the child rearing decisions while having an impartial party aid them in making these decisions. Most importantly, it can extract the child from the arguments or bickering of the parents, giving them a more peaceful environment. If this is the route you must go, be sure to spell your desires for the child out in full, descriptive terms to the therapist to be sure that your opinions or requests are well understood and presented to your parenting partner.

In these cases, you may also want to seek counseling with and without the children present, and encourage your ex to do the same. Going to sessions with your kids will give them the chance to voice any concerns they have in a safe environment with you, where they may express concerns or fears that they would not otherwise vocalize. Going without them gives you the opportunity to discuss problems that are not appropriate to discuss with the child present, as well as to hash out disagreements or problems being encountered with your partner.

Another important role for the family therapist as the time since your divorce passes will be to help them adapt to the changes each parent will be making in their lives. As each of you begin to date again, it may raise fears or issues that your child will not feel discussing with either one of his or her parents. Giving them the opportunity to have this conversation with a therapist could prove invaluable to them. As their parents make new acquaintances and begin to form new families, children may begin to feel that the already disrupted family they have is being torn apart even further. Concerns about still having the same amount of time to spend with their parents or whether the level of attention or affection from their mother or father may crop up. While nothing can replace the regular and sincere assurance from their parents of the special place the child will always have with them, your children may seek affirmation of this from another source. It will also give them a safe place to ask questions that may be concerning them about the impact this new person in their life may have on them, or how they will be expected to treat them or address them. The benefits to including a therapist in your plan to help your children cope with your divorce are innumerable.

Also available to children who are the product of a divorced couple is the option of group therapy or support groups. Giving your kids the chance to talk to other children who have lived, and hopefully thrived,

through the experience they are currently struggling with will help them not to feel alone through this process. Often, programs like this can be offered through your family therapist. If not, check with your child's school district to see what resources they have available.

However, you should not discount the potential perks of regular therapy appointments for yourself with the goal of helping your child. As you reenter the dating scene, you are going to encounter many different scenarios that could make your kids uncomfortable or unsure. A therapist can help you navigate the different problems you may face, including when to begin dating again, when it is appropriate to let people meet your children, and a multitude of other issues. They may also be able to provide you with effective and constructive ways you can discuss the fact that you are dating with your children, especially in ways that will let the child know that their time with you is not being threatened. A therapist may also be able to help you explain your need to spend time with another person in a way that will feel non-



confrontational to your child. After such an unhappy period in your life, you may feel torn between searching for happiness and remaining loyal to your children. A trained professional may be able to help you navigate the path to doing both, which will yield the best results for both you and your kids.

Your divorce will mark a major turning point in your child's life, and will probably be their first and largest emotional crisis. During and after the proceedings, it is likely that both parents will do their best to provide all the support, help, and love for their child that they can. However, the odds are that you are not prepared to help your kids through the sea of emotions that may overcome them. At such a young age, and with such a major change in their life, they themselves may not even be able to recognize or explain exactly what they are feeling. The confusion, pain, and fear may all manifest itself as an uncontrollable anger; the hurt caused by the splitting family could cause a withdrawn sadness and a prolonged social regression. I encourage you once more not to underestimate the psychological and emotional toll this will take on your children. Enroll them in therapy, and give them the opportunity to work these issues out with a qualified professional. While therapy can never replace the support and love you can give them as a parent, it can enable them to better cope with and confront their new life.

Chapter 6: Divorce's Effect on Your Child's Education

The stress and change of a divorce is going to impact every facet of a child's life, but school age children pose a special set of problems for parents. Finding a way to help your child maintain their current level of success in academics can be a daunting task, but will play a major role in determining the child's success later on in life. If a child flounders in school just after a divorce, especially teens going through crucial high school years, it can leave a devastating impact on their chances to get into some of their schools of choice, which may alter their career path further down the road into adulthood. Needless to say, finding a way to overcome the stress and anxiety produced by their change in living situation and helping them achieve success in their scholastic endeavors is crucial.

An important step in this process is for both parents to affirm to the child that the expectations they have held for their child in regards to their schoolwork will not be changed. Make sure that you maintain an appropriate amount of focus on monitoring the amount and nature of your child's schoolwork. Communication and coordination between both parents and the school will once again play a key role in making the experience as positive as possible for your child. Both parents need to agree on an overall academic plan for their young student, both short and long term. They need to weigh the options of what grades they are expecting from their children, how much time will be devoted to school work at home or for extracurricular activities, and other terms that need to be agreed upon. Then, they need to work together and with members of their children's school to make sure that they are maintaining the path they have planned upon.

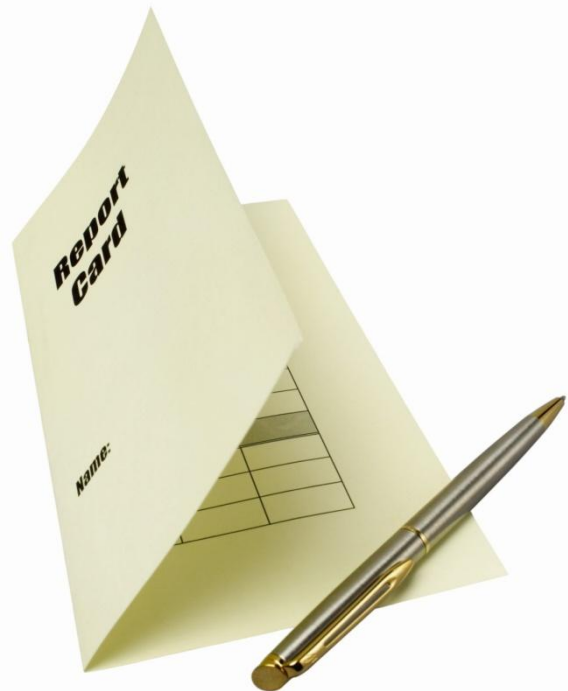


Another sound piece of advice is to let the faculty of your children's school play an active role in aiding you through the situation. After the decision has been made to seek out a divorce, schedule a meeting with the corresponding teachers or guidance counselors. Explain to them your situation, and ask for their input in your child's current academic progress. These people are, in theory, the current leading experts on your child's academic life. Take advantage of their knowledge and use them as resources in making sure that you help your kids reach the highest level of success that they can. Informing the teacher will allow them to have preemptive knowledge of what will be a stressful situation for your child, which will give them an opportunity to make sure they receive the extra attention they need to maintain their grades. It

will also make the teacher more wary and watchful for a social regression in the child, making them more able to alert you to such matters if they arise.

School counselors are also an important figure in your child's school life. Divorcing parents are an issue that counselors face all too often, and many of them have received special training on how to handle children going through this experience. The counselor can schedule regular visits with your child during their school week to make sure that their school experience is remaining as close to normal as possible. Working with the teachers, the counselor can monitor signs of excessive anxiety. Often, schools will have special resources available to children who are coping with their parents' divorce. Ask your counselors what they can offer to help your child stay calm and focused on their schoolwork, and take advantage of what they offer you. At this crucial time, your child will be able to use as much help as you can give them.

Another potential issue that may arise will be the extent to which both parents feel their children should be educated. Planning for college needs to begin early in the child's life, but the cost will be largely incurred after they have turned eighteen. It is essential for the parents to reach an agreement on college planning. A failure to do so could leave your kids without the proper financial support to achieve a college degree, an essential tool while trying to build a career. If the plan while you were still married included funding your child's college education, the best route is to continue to do so. Abandoning plans for your son or daughter's education as a result of your divorce will not only affect them logistically, but could also be hurtful to them emotionally. High school age children who lose the chance to go to college because their parents were unwilling or unable to reach an agreement on the terms through which the tuition would be paid may harbor a grudge for an extended time over an issue that serious.



Chapter 7: Handling an Uncooperative Parenting Partner

Parenting after divorce is a three party affair, often one in which two parties do not get along well enough to work together. While you can take responsibility for your own actions and do your best to remain committed to providing for the needs of the child, you cannot always force your parenting partner to make the same types of decisions. Selfishness, anger, or bitterness may cloud their judgment, and prevent them from making decisions that most benefit the child involved. If you find yourself in this situation, it is important to elevate yourself above the fray your ex may be trying to draw you into in order to get a clearer picture of how to help your kids. In order to reduce tensions, this may require a bit of flexibility from you.

Despite your best efforts, you may find your child's other parent attempting to use the child as an implement to cause you grief or inconvenience. They may do these things through constantly demanding changes to the custody schedule, frequently dropping or picking up the child early or late, intentionally undermining parental agreements you had made in regards to the child, or any of a number of ways. The most important thing you can do in these situations is to remain calm. Creating a dramatic scene or fight in front of the child may be exactly what they are hoping for and will only serve to upset children who may see or overhear the argument. Though it may be difficult when the mother or father shows up a half hour late to drop the child off for the fourth consecutive time, for example, it is in the best interest of the child to hold back your anger or frustration at that time. If they begin to make a habit of disregarding the plan or agreement you had set forth after your divorce, begin documenting these instances, and keep an accurate record. Voicemails, e-mails, and



text messages pertaining to these issues should be saved as well, as they may become useful should you decide to pursue further mediation or intervention from an outside source.

Also, do not involve or associate the child in any way with the actions of the other parent, even as a means to try to get information. Do not ask them why they arrived late, or what might have held them up. Even though you would not be accusing your kids of any wrongdoing, they may begin to feel as though they share some of the blame associated with their mother or father's failings. If they begin to explain the delay unprovoked, calmly explain to them that you understand how little control they have over being transported back and forth and ensure them that any problems are worth the chance to spend time with them.

Along the same lines, if your child comes to your house from their other home and begins venting about an issue or problem that arose while they were spending time with your ex, do not jump to conclusions or rush to judgment. While you may feel inclined to automatically take your son or daughter's side, listen to their problem and reserve your opinion. At the next opportunity, discuss your child's concerns with the respective party involved and try to ascertain what happened. While you may have a large number of negative experiences in the past regarding your ex, it's important to bear in mind that your child is still just that- a child. What may have begun over an argument over completing their homework or a bad grade may have been relayed to you in a different or more one sided light. Keep an open mind when figuring out the source of your child's dismay.

The end goal that will yield the most positive results for your child is to keep both parents as actively involved as possible in raising your children. However, if your child's other parent has become so uncooperative that you are certain this is no longer an option, seeking to alter the custody agreement may be in the best interests of the child. Taking time away from the child with one of their parents can be a painful experience for everyone involved, and can often be felt as an extension of the divorce. If your former spouse has left you no choice but to seek out this route, sit the child down and explain to them why you are trying to make the changes you are seeking. Explain to them that, while their father or mother still loves them very much, they are acting in a way that indicates they have lost track of what is in the best interest of their kids.

When seeking to alter the custody agreement, attempting to stop all contact with the parent may not be the best practice, despite the amount of trouble they are causing for yourself and your children. If the situation has grown to the point of outright negligence, you may be better suited to seek monitored visitation instead of completely revoking the rights of the father or mother. So long as you can be sure the time spent together will occur in a safe environment, it is most healthy to allow the child to get to know both of their parents, and as they get older, allow them to form their own opinions.

Epilogue

We've outlined many steps you can take to try to help your child cope with the painful process of divorce. Obviously, each child and divorce is going to present its own unique set of circumstances for both the kids and the set of parents. Do not feel like you have to face this challenge alone. Aside from the help of professional therapists, there are support groups set up in most areas for each individual struggling through the process. Single mothers trying to figure out how to handle doing a large amount of parenting alone while juggling a career and dealing with their ex can find plenty of other people in similar situations to vent to, ask questions of, and even seek advice from. Likewise, fathers who may be struggling with being separated from their children if they were the parent who left the household may be looking for a forum to express their concerns, sadness, or questions to people who have lived through these experiences before. Often, checking at a local library or family center for postings about when these groups meet will help. The better equipped you are to handle the problems you will face, the better you will be able to help your children cope effectively. For more information please visit www.VillaniDeLuca.com.

