

# Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

## Ten Tips For Handling The Children After Divorce

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Psychologists used to believe that children were malleable, flexible, and more easily processed the hurdles inherent in divorce and remarriage. That assumption has been completely disproven. We now know that it takes children far longer to process their parents' divorce, than it takes adults. And quick remarriage makes things even more complex and difficult for children, even if they sorely miss your ex-spouse.

So here are ten short tips for you to ponder, regarding your children, if you are divorcing or divorced. Each of these tips could represent a chapter in a book. The fact that we've compressed them into four or five lines doesn't mean they're inconsequential. We encourage you to think about each item, and form a written plan as to how you will choose to handle each tip.

We suggest you write your plan down so that you can better remember it, especially during times of stress.

1. Never use the children against one another. This only serves to damage the kids, and escalate the tension between spouses. The more that parents use their children as "rag dolls" to bash one another during the divorcing process, the more damage it will cause the children, and the longer it will take for children to heal.
2. Be extremely cautious in saying anything about the reasons for divorce. Each parent naturally wants their kids to see the divorce from their perspective. But most often the kids really don't want to know why the divorce happened. Most often the kids are grieving about the end of their family system, and to dump a load of dirt onto their other parent is almost the same as dumping that load directly onto the kids.
3. Because the children's self-esteem and identity is tied to both parents, be aware that when you lash out at your ex-spouse in the kids' presence, you are harming them too. No matter how angry or hurt you may be, take the high road when around your kids. Don't play the victim role; don't dump; don't accuse or blame.
4. Encourage the children's ongoing contact with each parent. After all, the children's identities are tied up in both parents, not just one. To the very best of your ability,

establish and support a workable solution for both parents to have access to the children.

5. Try to operate from the same set of rules for the kids. Divorce is confusing for children. It can be very helpful, therefore, for each parent to support the same set of rules for the children (in terms of politeness, respect, school work, bed-time, etc.)
6. Recognize the children do not yet have adult cognitive skills. They are therefore very likely to “act out” their feelings rather than process them by talking. Expect this. It’s probably going to get worse before it gets better.
7. Recognize also that children are emotional rather than rational creatures. It’s not unusual for any emotion that an adult feels, to be magnified in a child’s experience. Therefore, as disoriented and crazy as you may feel right now, magnify that experience by a factor of 5 in the lives of your children.
8. Expect your children to take at least 6 – 8 years to recover from what’s going on right now. Research supports the idea that it takes an adult 2-3 years to “heal” from a divorce. Some research indicates it takes an average child 6-8 years to heal from parental divorce. However, according to longitudinal research by Judy Wallerstein (Second Chances), children may never completely heal from their parents’ divorce.
7. Be as wise as you may with your kids, because what you tell them and how you act during this stressful time will eventually become part of their assessment of *you*, not your spouse. The children will eventually make their own assessment of both parents’ behavior and responsibility, and that assessment will then follow both parents for years, perhaps for the rest of your life.
8. Each child is going to need *more* time and *more* support from each parent as you go through the divorce. Unless the children are grown and gone, be prepared to give them more of yourselves, for at least the next four to six years. Their lives have been shattered. They’re going to be picking up the pieces for a very long time. They are going to need you.
9. Seek additional adult support for yourself, primarily with same-sex friends, so that a) you avoid making your children your source of emotional support, and b) you avoid doing the dating rebound thing. Your children need you to support them, not vice versa. And don’t be surprised if they express anger against any dating partner you may bring home. Their idealized solution is very likely your reattachment to your spouse, not to some new interloper.
10. Keep your kids out of “caretaking” roles. As nature abhors a vacuum, so children abhor parental strife. Be very aware that the kids will try to step in and become “parents” or “spouses” in a family system that is running amok.