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Family Focus

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We've all seen examples of how ugly and bitter divorces can be in movies and in reality. Vindictive behavior can range from manipulative and destructive to downright absurd. I know of one husband who slashed the tires on his soon-to-be ex-wife's car and smeared dog poop on the windshield, and a wife who sold her estranged husband's prized golf clubs on Craigslist. Needless to say, these couples were not heading for a smooth divorce.

In continuing to look at the difficulties and heartache many go through in a divorce, here are some recommendations for what not to do when divorcing, especially when children are involved. It is important to make your children your highest priority. Many of these "don'ts" may be familiar, but practicing them is a lot harder than reading about them.

- 1) Never badmouth the other parent to your children, even when they're grown. You will sacrifice their well-being and ability to hold their parents in high regard just for a few moments of your own satisfaction and vindication. If you truly love your children, you will work on exercising complete self-control with them. Find those with whom you can release your hurt and anger in confidence, such as a highly trustworthy friend, a spiritual advisor or a therapist.
- 2) Don't reveal private information about your marital relationship and dissolution to your children. Don't discuss your personal feelings about your former partner or your divorce, or for that matter, your personal life in general. These are your children, not your friends. Even when they are adults, there is no positive rationale for revealing details to them about your relationship with their other parent.
- 3) Even while you refrain from discussing blame or details of the divorce with your children, don't allow them to be exposed to your adult issues by others, such as your friends or relatives. This is why it is important to confide only in those who can be trusted not to reveal what you have told them.
- 4) Don't disrupt your kids so they have to constantly pack up to go to each parent. Arrange for them to have the whole school week at one location if possible. Splitting their time so they have two days here and three days there is always a hardship and sacrifice for children. Or, as mentioned in the previous column, consider nesting as a way to proceed. Look out for their needs over your own. You may not get to spend as much time with them as you would like or feels fair, but if you are subordinating your own needs to theirs, you will be a true hero.
- 5) Don't introduce your children to another romantic liaison in your life or move in with someone else right away. Wait as long as possible. When their world suddenly feels precarious, they need to know that they come first to each of their parents. Proceed slowly and discreetly.
- 6) Do not mention or allude to your children that you received unfair financial treatment as a result of your divorce. Just as money matters are the number one source of friction for married couples, so too are finances high on the list of divorcing couples' struggles with each other. It is especially difficult if prior to your divorce you were in a position of being able to do more for your children financially. You can let your children know you still want to be able to send them to camp or pay for new clothes, and that you will save up for these expenditures.
- 7) Don't avoid talking to your ex when you encounter each other at your children's school, sports and other events. Try to prevent awkward, strained situations for the sake of your children. Ideally, you and your ex will be able to communicate well with each other and unite for family activities that are important to your children. Therapists work not only with intact couples, but also with divorcing and divorced couples who are trying to sort out their relationships with each other going forward. If you and your ex have a cold war mentality with each other, it is important to seek assistance.
- 8) Do not turn to large quantities of alcohol, food, or other substances to deal with your distress over your divorce. It is important for you to take good care of yourself for your own sake, of course, but also for your children's. You are still a role model for them, as well as one of the people they count on most in the world. They have already experienced a major disruption in their lives, and it is important not to compound their

lives further with negative issues that can be avoided. Get help quickly if you are heading in a self-destructive direction.

9) Don't let yourself remain in a low state of mind for too long. Initially, you may well feel depressed, anxious, and extremely emotional. You may not feel that you can control your emotions, which can range from sadness to anger to embarrassment to worry. Many people feel that they have failed. Even if you are relieved to be out of an unhappy marriage, there is usually a sense of loss. But eventually you can recover, with or without outside assistance. Remember that you are showing your children not only how to handle loss, but also how to handle adversity. They will take their cues from you and your ex. You want them to be happy, thriving individuals of course, so keep them in the forefront at all times.

10) Try not to worry about the divorce interfering with your children's ability to flourish. After the initial adjustment period, they can certainly have the potential to be happy and successful in all areas of their lives. Even if your ex doesn't cooperate in the ways that are listed above, you can make a huge difference. If you can set a good example for them, your children will have at least one strong role model.

11) At the same time, don't put all of the responsibility for your children's emotional well-being on yourself. If you see significant changes in a child's behavior, such as withdrawal from people and activities, emotional volatility, nightmares, defiance, turning to substances, or other concerning changes, don't hesitate to get help. School counselors, family therapists, and groups for children of divorce are some available sources of support.

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