

# How Parents Can Best Help Their Kids During a Bitter Divorce

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**“Family is the first school for young children, and parents are powerful models.”**

**– Alice Sterling Honig**



Divorce is always rough on all concerned, especially children. No matter how amiable an impending split between the parents starts out, it’s almost inevitable that strife, disagreements, conflicting direction and seemingly arbitrary changing of family rules will have a profound effect on their children. Still, not everyone can or should stay married for the sake of the kids. How, then, can parents best help their kids during a bitter divorce?

To gain some perspective on this sensitive topic, I spoke with [Dr. Anita Gadhia-Smith](#), a Washington, DC psychiatrist, and Nick Hobson, PhD researcher at [Psychology Compass](#).

## **Conflicting Emotions and Divided Loyalties**

By some estimates, 50 percent of American families experience divorce. The trail of negative effects an acrimonious uncoupling can have on children is undoubtedly the most destructive outcome in such scenarios, as they have numerous [tough issues](#) to deal with. “Children are plagued with conflicting emotions and divided loyalties,” says Dr. Gadhia-Smith. “They love both of their parents and have great difficulty negotiating their own complex feelings while being subjected to family hostility that emerges during a difficult divorce.”

According to Gadhia-Smith, guilt, fear, numbness, [depression](#), and confusion are just some of the feelings that emerge. Because children are attached to both parents, she says, there is an emotional rupture that occurs during divorce. “They often feel that they have to take sides, and fear that one or the other parent will be angry with them if they take the other parent’s side.”

What follows is unfortunate, but typical, as this can lead to double mindedness, when the child takes the side of one parent when they are with them, and takes the other side when with the other. “People pleasing is a dangerous tendency that can develop in this situation, when children are unconsciously or consciously fearful of abandonment,” adds Gadhia-Smith. “And for children, abandonment equals survival. They need their parents in order to survive and it is not always clear that they will be OK without one of them.” Gadhia-Smith recommends giving their children plenty of reassurance that both parents will still be very much in their lives and that they will be OK.

### **Abandonment, Dissociation and Isolation**

Common in divorces is the tendency for one parent to be less present than the other after separation. The sad result is that the children do feel abandoned. “This can become a very deep wound that can persist throughout the child’s entire lifetime,” says Gadhia-Smith. She notes that an [abandonment rupture](#) is also something that can play out in many of the children’s relationships later in life — in adulthood, in work, platonic, and romantic relationships. “For the child, having an unhealed childhood abandonment wound can wreak havoc later in life if unaddressed. Therefore, it is important that during an acrimonious divorce children are afforded support systems of their own through their own [therapy](#), family members, and community resources.”

Another distressing affect that is often seen in children is the tendency to dissociate, cautions Gadhia-Smith. This can happen through drugs and alcohol, but is increasingly happening through electronics addiction, she says. “Children and young adults simply ‘check out’ while they are at home through the obsessional and relentless use of electronics. This is a way to isolate and distance themselves from their own feelings and from the reality that surrounds them.” To help counter this, she says that it is important that parents “address any budding addictions and provide enough help and resources at an early enough age so that children do not go down the rabbit hole.”

Furthermore, if parents see you see their children’s grades going down, activities that were once enjoyed being abandoned, and isolation tendencies, “It is time to act and focus on restoring your children to balance and wholeness. This requires parents to get out of their own emotions, rise above their own personal desires, and focus on what is really best for the children.”

### **Parents Acting Out Their Own Negative Emotions**

Sometimes one parent will try to use a child to punish the other parent, but Gadhia-Smith says it is best not to point that out or comment on it. “Instead, simply practice good behavior yourself. This is not a time for tit for tat.” Rise above the other parent’s negative behavior, don’t say anything negative about the other parent, and model good healthy behavior for the children. “Children are very smart and perceptive, and they know healthy behavior when they see it,” says Gadhia-Smith. “It is not so much what you say is what you do that counts the most. Show your children how to have dignity and unconditional love, even when you don’t agree with someone.”

Another important point for divorcing parents to pay heed to is helping their kids understand that they are not responsible for their parents’ feelings or emotional well-being. “It is not

uncommon to see children become mini-caretakers in these difficult divorces,” Gadhia-Smith says. “Try to keep parental conflicts private, and not have them in front of your children. When you are around your children, strive to have a united front and always put the children’s best interest first, above your own – even if you’re not getting your own way. This requires parents to really dig deep and rise to the level of maturity required to facilitate a healthy divorce process.

Rising above the parental conflict so the kids are less affected by the impending split isn’t without difficulty. That’s because it’s too easy for parents to get caught up in personal feelings and get lost in the conflict with each other. Here, Gadhia-Smith advises parents to keep their personal conflicts with the other spouse separate from the children, and focus parental interactions with the kids on the children’s [well-being](#). “It is important to have good boundaries and adequate professional help to facilitate this process. Get as much help as you possibly can, and the process will resolve more quickly. If you are a parent, remember that this is not all about you. Good [parenting](#) means you need to put your children first and also treat your ex-spouse with respect and dignity. Do everything you can to create a new healthy relationship with your ex-spouse, since they’re going to be in your life for a very long time.”

### **Building Coping Self-Efficacy in Your Children**

Since every divorce is bound to be a confusing and emotion-wrought experience for children, some proactive things loving parents (despite the rift between them) can do involves helping their kids build coping [self-efficacy](#). In fact, says Hobson, “As a parent contemplating or going through a divorce, part of your focus should be on building coping self-efficacy in your children.” You are the parents. You have responsibilities that come with the role. “No matter how smooth the process is, the separation is bound to be an emotionally trying time for your child. Your job is to prepare them for whatever uncomfortable emotions may arise.”

### **What is coping self-efficacy? How do parents help nurture it in their offspring?**

Coping self-efficacy is the ability to handle difficult situations and emotions. Another way to think of coping self-efficacy, says Hobson, is building your child’s confidence so that they know they’re able to handle any type of future stress or worries. Yet, this doesn’t happen overnight. Parents must recognize the need for a gradual build-up for the child to gain those positive reinforcements.

Hobson encourages parents to start off small and recommends they begin by encouraging their child to be more introspective. For instance, it’s especially important to take notice of when the kids are upset about something (unrelated to the divorce at first). “But avoid the default parenting style of distracting, soothing, or deflecting in mitigating the distress,” he cautions. “Instead, get them to construct their own coping plan. Engage your child in Socratic style questioning, being sure to not ‘give away’ the answer. You want them to feel that they came up with the idea and they implemented a plan of action. Having that personal agency is key for building their self-efficacy.”

### **Creating a good foundation for self-efficacy.**

The advice for parents to start off small is key to prepare a solid foundation for the children to develop self-efficacy. Hobson explain that starting off small is important because it creates a good foundational level of [confidence](#). “That feeling of overcoming a difficult situation, no

matter how small, acts as a self-signaling mechanism: the child tells themselves they have the resources to cope and get through a difficult situation.” Early successes experienced by the child leads to self-empowerment, the knowledge that he or she can handle other things as well, even bigger things. Furthermore, Hobson says, the stepwise building of self-efficacy is done to prepare them for the difficult scenarios that will inevitably follow from the divorce. “This exercise doesn’t rid your child of all negative emotions, however. What it does do is equip them with the tools to be able to confront those feelings.”