

Worried about the breakup of your marriage? *It doesn't have to result in a vicious battle.*

Make your situation better. Read the wise advice in this article series authored by experienced family lawyers. Then consider how you'll proceed in the best interests of yourself and your family.

Article 4: How will you look after your children during and after a breakup?

This is the fourth of ten articles designed to help people understand the complex area of family law. The articles are not a substitute for legal advice. They are meant to help you focus on the issues that you should consider when faced with family conflict.

Children look to their families as their source of security, stability and nurture. Their sense of well being is intimately tied to their parents' sense of well being. So how children fare through a marriage breakup depends on the strength and maturity of their parents at this time.

Regardless of the reason for your family breakup, be sure that your children are feeling all the same emotions you are feeling at this time. The difference between your children and you is that they don't have the maturity or the knowledge to rationalize the situation or to see long term benefits from the breakup.

Studies show that the level of conflict that children observe between their parents is the overwhelming factor that influences how they will fare after a marriage breakdown. Parents who involve their children in their conflict will often see the negative impact manifest in the future behavior of their children.

Here are some suggested dos and don'ts for dealing with children during a breakup from a lawyer who has dealt with family disputes for over thirty years:

1. Keep conflict away from the children. This includes telephone calls in their presence, discussions with other adults either in person or on the phone, and using gestures or words that are put-downs of your spouse.
2. Do not use your child to pass messages to your spouse. Your child is not a courier service. If you can't talk to your spouse in person, email him or her.
3. Never blame, denigrate, or contradict your spouse in front of your children. Doing so is destructive before your breakup, and is destructive after.
4. The message your children will benefit most from is "mom and dad can't live together, but we both still love you." Children need to hear this to be reassured that they will be loved unconditionally no matter what happens between their parents.
5. Encourage your children to seek counseling. Counselors are available through the school system. Many community agencies also have counselors who specialize in children.
6. Listen to your children. They are often the silent parties in a noisy time, but they need to be heard. Children will have strong and reasonable ideas about where they should live and what visiting schedules make sense to them. Listen.

The Kelowna Family Center offers a course on Parenting after Separation. It is held during an evening, and it is free. I strongly recommend you take the course.

Finally, remember that you and your spouse are the only parents your children will ever have. They are bonded to both of you with ties you will only appreciate years from now when you walk with them through struggles in their adult lives. How they will do then is dependant on what you do now.

Ronald J. Smith and Glenda Peacock are family lawyers and mediators based in Kelowna, BC. They wrote this article series to help people learn about preparing for collaborative and constructive solutions to the legal issues involved in marriage breakup.

You can contact Smith Peacock for a consultation by phoning 250.860.7868 or 888.787.6484.

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