

The Intelligent Divorce

The Mini Book

A primer on "How To Tell Your Kids About Divorce", "A Child's Bill Of Rights" and "Creating A Healthy Family Going Forward"



Advance Praise

"Dr. Banschick's unique and credible voice is pragmatic and optimistic. The anecdotal evidence throughout the book rings true, and this makes *The Intelligent Divorce* an important read."

—RICHARD FRANCIS, M.D.

CLINICAL TEXTBOOK OF ADDICTION DISORDERS

FOUNDING PRESIDENT, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ADDICTION PSYCHIATRY

"The Intelligent Divorce is a blessing. It ought to become required reading for any professional in the mental health or legal field. The book's incredible thoughtfulness and common sense invites practitioners to offer alternative, cooperative approaches, especially when children are involved."

—Samuel C. Klagsbrun, M.D. Executive Medical Director, Four Winds Hospital Chairman of Pastoral Counseling, Jewish Theological Seminary

"Dr. Banschick is a rare talent, as practical as Dr. Phil, as soulful as Rabbi Kushner and as savvy about men and woman as John Gray. He can guide rebuilding families so that they not only survive but thrive."

—JILL BROOKE CONTRIBUTOR, CBS EARLY SHOW, ABC, CNN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, FIRSTWIVESWORLD.COM

"The Intelligent Divorce, uniquely in my experience, guides the reader through the travails of divorce with a special focus on the needs of the children. Comprehensive, practical and with a special section of developmentally appropriate charts to assist in following a child's progress, it's a must read for any professional caring for children."

—Peter Acker, M.D. FAAP, Chairman, Department of Pediatrics, Greenwich Hospital

"The Intelligent Divorce is a powerful resource for divorcing parents and mental health professionals, teaching essential parenting skills that will influence the well being of many children."

—Nancy Gardner, M.S.W.

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"When divorce has to happen it's a blessing that someone as kind, empathetic and child-intelligent as Dr. Mark Banschick is among us. *The Intelligent Divorce* makes a potentially destructive period in a child's life much kinder.

"A must-have book for all who personally come into contact with divorce — and who hasn't!"

—Judith Guedalia, Ph.D. Director, Neuropsychology Unit Shaare Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel

"Dr. Banschick's encyclopedic book on divorce can be of inestimable value to anyone considering or already in the process of a divorce."

—Louis Getoff, Ph.D.
Institute of Imago Relationship Therapy
Clinical Psychologist and Psychoanalyst

"Mark Banschick leads our doctoral students through challenging psychological theories, never letting us forget our fundamental objective of moving forward with the least damage to our children."

—Carol Ochs, Ph.D.

Reaching Godward: Voices from Jewish Spiritual Guidance

Director, Hebrew Union College Graduate

School and Ministry Program

"The Intelligent Divorce is of critical importance for divorcing couples. Following his masterful presentation at our family institute in Jerusalem we adopted his program for divorcing couples in our community, and it has made a significant difference. I strongly recommend this book."

—Yisrael Levitz,
Director, Family Institute of Neve Yerushalayım, Israel
Clinical Psychologist, Professor Emeritus, Yeshiva University

"Dr. Banschick brings the message of a healthier divorce to parents and professionals who need to hear it. His program serves as a virtual classroom in how to handle one of life's toughest problems."

—Leonard Shyles, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Communications, Villanova University

The Intelligent Divorce The Mini Book

A primer on "How To Tell Your Kids About Divorce", "A Child's Bill Of Rights" and "Creating A Healthy Family Going Forward"

Mark R. Banschick, M.D.

David Tabatsky

The Intelligent Divorce is not intended as a substitute for psychotherapy or professional consultations in matters of family crisis. Whenever appropriate, we encourage you to seek expert medical help and/or legal advice. The Intelligent Divorce should be used only as a general guide and not as the ultimate source of information on divorce.

The author and publisher shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused, or alleged to have been caused, directly or indirectly, by the information contained in this book.

Throughout the book, you'll discover anecdotal scenarios (EXAMPLE), analytical evaluations ("From the Couch") and eyewitness (My Story) accounts. Names and identifying characteristics of individuals mentioned in this book have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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Your Child's Bill of Rights

- 1. Don't ask me to choose sides.
- 2. Spare me the details of your legal proceedings.
- 3. Don't confide in me or lean on me. It's too much.
- 4. Give me privacy on the phone with my other parent.
- 5. Don't cross-examine me afterward.
- 6. I am not your messenger.
- 7. Don't ever ask me to lie to one of my parents.
- 8. Listen to me when I have something to say.
- 9. No guilt trips, no matter what.
- 10. Don't spoil me, even if you do feel guilty.

Adapted from The New York Law Journal (1996)

Foreword

Our Mission

The goal of *The Intelligent Divorce* is not to prevent divorce because, like it or not, it's here to stay. Our mission is to help parents negotiate this complicated and sometimes unbearable terrain with grace, compassion, and intelligence. When parents commit to an intelligent divorce they commit to protecting the innocence of their children. This is the most important reason for writing this book, and we hope it will be your biggest motivation for reading it.

The National Vital Statistics Report, published by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, tells us that well over two million people obtained a divorce in 2008. For every two marriages in that year, the report found approximately one divorce. It's no surprise then, that hundreds of websites are devoted to divorce. With that in mind, we want you to know that you are not alone. Help is right here in your hands.

If you aren't doing so well with your divorce then your kids will probably have a tough time, too. They want to see their mom and dad centered and communicating effectively with each other.

The Intelligent Divorce is devoted to helping people see divorce through the lens of relationships. When parents handle their relationships well, with each other and with their children, divorce becomes a healthier experience for everyone. Along the way, you will learn detailed information about your children's development during critical phases of their childhood. You'll learn to handle divorce with greater wisdom and security, and as a result you'll be able to do a much better job of protecting you children's innocence.

In subsequent books in The Intelligent Divorce series, we will examine the nature of regression, how to handle anger, and how to manage anxiety. You'll gain insight and pragmatic advice on dealing with ex-husbands or ex-wives. You'll discover how to be a proactive thinker and a positive role model for your children.

A significant feature you'll find in the back of the book is a Parenting Agreement both parties can sign and commit their best effort to keeping.

In the twenty-first century, divorce is a choice. And more often than one might imagine, those who are pulled grudgingly into a divorce often find themselves in a better place once they reach the other side.

Perspective is vital. Many children do well, despite the upheavals of a divorce. Some even thrive, more than they might have, given the alternative of enduring the stress of an unhappy household.

Perspective has taught us that couples often make their biggest blunders right at the beginning of a divorce, when they are feeling raw, uncertain, and vulnerable.

As a child psychiatrist and expert witness in custody matters, I have seen how divorce affects each and every member of the family, including siblings, grandparents and in-laws. An adversarial legal system, although designed to protect the rights of parents and children, often makes what's already an impossibly difficult process just plain impossible. From an epidemiological point of view, divorce can be seen as a public health problem because it places men, women, and especially children at risk.

More than ten years ago, with the concept of preventative care in mind, I began teaching *The Intelligent Divorce* to parents who wanted to do better by divorcing humanely, thereby prioritizing the welfare of their children. I have created a website to support this course and have developed seminars and workshops, which have been taught throughout the country. I hope you will use this book as an interactive workbook of sorts and consider it a support group you can carry with you.

Remember, you are not alone.



In a spirit of fairness and authenticity we are randomly interchanging the use of male and female anecdotal examples throughout the book. We are, in effect (and pardon the pun), divorcing ourselves from any perceived gender bias.

The terms "ex" and "ex-spouse" are meant to include those who are preparing for a divorce, in the midst of one, or have already signed off on the entire process.

Because Your Kids Come First

Be On Top Of Your Game

Lots of things about divorce seem unfair. Regardless, you must be willing to step up and be there for your children. With the right attitude, it will keep you sane and give your children what they need in order to thrive.

Three different factors may challenge your parenting skills during a divorce. The first deals with your child's reaction to the realities of divorce. Each child, depending on his or her age and environment, will have a unique set of responses and the more you understand about child development the better off you will be in dealing with his or her individual issues.

The second factor, which can compromise effective parenting, includes the individual anxieties any parent may face, like anger, exhaustion, or fear of the unknown, any of which can cloud sound judgment and cause you to make mistakes. Since divorce poses health risks due to increased levels of stress, it's best to make sure that you take good care of yourself, for your own benefit and for your children's, too.

The third, and potentially the most disturbing, factor affecting children in divorce is the relationship between ex-spouses. When a marriage breaks up, it's no surprise that the two parties involved may not get along. But the real danger occurs when those conflicts get out of hand and directly affect their kids.

Therefore, no rational discussion about divorce can continue without recognizing the critical role that power struggles play

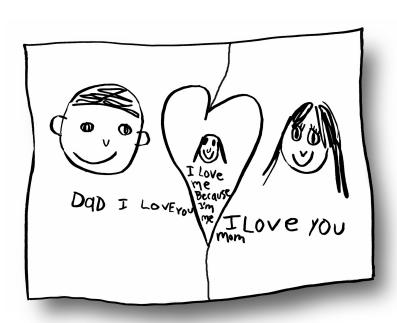
in all intimate relationships, especially during a break-up when children are involved.

No one agrees with a partner on everything. We're just not built that way. When two people have different opinions and each feels the need to win, sometimes at all costs, nobody really does. It takes just one person to generate a power struggle, because if one of you engages the other negatively, the other will most often respond in self-defense. Whatever the issue may be, it all comes down to the same thing. Is it going to be a win-win situation for you and your children, or not?

It all starts with you. During a divorce, you will focus on many relationships: with your ex, attorneys, therapists, ministers, friends, and even accountants. But the most crucial relationship besides the one you have with yourself is the one you have with your kids. For their sake, it's vital that you be on top of your game.

CHAPTER

Healthy Children: Keep Your Eye on the Prize



A seven-year-old finds stability during her parents' divorce, as featured with Dr. Banschick on CBS's *The Early Show*.

The Golden Rule

Protecting your children's innocence should be the first priority of anyone involved in a divorce. The break-up of a family will test your endurance and character and may substantially redefine your life, but the one thing that endures is the relationship you have with your children. An intelligent divorce yields happy and healthy kids who have good relationships with both parents.

This can be achieved by a commitment to creating positive environments where your children will intuitively feel safe and secure. Although you and your spouse may clash at times, both parties need to work on their differences in order to provide their children with a united front when it comes to parenting.

It's tricky enough to manage the many complications of joint parenting in the best of marriages. Imagine how bad it can get in the midst of a divorce when parents stop listening to each other and involve their children in their disputes. When parents expose their kids to their emotional war all bets are off because that puts their kids at risk for long term psychological trauma. How does a child maintain her innocence if she doesn't feel safe in her own home?

But all of this can be prevented. When parents are disciplined and respect their children's right to live as normal a life as possible, their kids will respond positively.

Keep your eye on the prize. Even one parent doing it right makes a difference.

EXAMPLE

When Grown-ups Act Like Grown-ups

If there was ever a difficult divorce, it's revealed in the story of Marty and Diane. They just can't stand each other. Both had affairs during their marriage and distrusted each other to the core. They have been litigating relentlessly for five years and are constantly in and out of court.

But something is special about these two people. They keep their problems to themselves. Marty and Diane have the unwavering discipline to protect the innocence of their children, Tommy (12), Chris (9), and Benny (6).

For example, Diane cannot believe that Marty is "cheating" on her again (this time financially). Their lawyers are all over it. They are back in court because Marty wants to reduce the amount of money he pays her.

"Look, we are going through tough times. My store is in trouble and I don't have the money."

Diane believes that the money has been stowed away elsewhere. Yet, when Chris is asked how his parents get along, he smiles and says:

"You should see my friend Joe's parents. They can't sit in the same room without yelling at each other. I have it pretty good."

"From the Couch"

Protecting the innocence of your children takes discipline and hard work.

Marty and Diane have real differences, which have caused distrust and anger. But the love and respect they share for their

children trumps their wish to get back at each other through their kids. They are able to draw a line in the sand, which means no bad mouthing either parent in front of the children.

As a result, their kids are protected. Despite their own troubled relationship, Marty and Diane have been more or less successful in protecting their children's innocence. Let's applaud this couple's achievement and hope that others will emulate the parenting portion of their behavior.

EXAMPLESam and Maya Lose It

Sam and Maya have stayed friends through a pretty good divorce but some of the power struggles inherent in their relationship have continued. They have two children, Danny (8) and Beth (4).

Sometimes, Maya just cannot believe Sam's "stupidity" in how he manages things. She thinks that he does not supervise their kids well enough.

In a fit of anger, she will say, "Your father doesn't take care of you very well."

"What do you mean?" her daughter asks, worried.

"I mean your father doesn't really care. He just cares about himself."

"That's not true!" Danny protests.

Beth begins crying. "I don't think so, Mommy. Daddy loves us, right?"

"Why are you saying that?" Danny asks, challenging his mother.

"From the Couch"

Unlike the story of Marty and Diane, who truly have animosity toward each other, Sam and Maya are doing pretty well. But they lack discipline in keeping whatever conflicts they have to themselves.

Maya will probably forget what she said to her kids and years from now it will mean nothing. It was a silly slip of the tongue because, in that moment, she was angry at Sam.

But Beth may not forget. And Danny probably won't. Kids are very sensitive to these noxious moments because they depend so much on their parents. The notion that one parent or the other might be inadequate pierces their sense of safety, a security blanket that is so important to nurture in the developing child.

Although Sam and Maya have a better divorce and struggle less with each other, they may be injuring their children more intensely than Marty and Diane, a deeply troubled but disciplined divorcing couple.

Parents who keep their conflicts to themselves do well by their kids. They can do even better if they make certain types of joint decisions together, however testy their divorce may be.

EXAMPLEPicture Perfect

Herb and Trisha broke up when their kids, Joshua (16), Blake (14), Natalie (12), and Tyrone (9) were quite young. Four kids can be next to impossible for many parents, let alone those divorcing, but Herb and Trisha remained a team. They shared joint custody. The kids were with Trisha most nights for consistency's sake, and with Herb on alternate weekends and, as they got older, for overnights during the week.

Joshua was a pushy teenager, while Natalie had attention problems. Instead of blaming each other for the kids' issues, Herb and Trisha regularly emailed and talked things through together. They were excellent role models for their kids.

One day, Trisha found some marijuana in Josh's backpack. She consulted Herb and they confronted him together. Afterward, when a consequence was required (and the weed was flushed down the toilet), Herb and Trisha privately debated their differing values on the subject and came up with a united front.

"From The Couch"

Herb and Trisha present a best-case scenario, but it's clear that many parents don't have a willing partner, or any partner, for that matter.

But the lesson is an important one. Herb and Trisha have committed themselves to work together behind the scenes in order to give their four children stability and a united voice in parenting. This takes mutual respect and discipline.

You probably know "the blame game" from both sides and how easy it is to get caught up in yet another power struggle. Yet, kids with attention problems, like Natalie, often require professional help and tutoring coordination in both homes. And Joshua's marijuana problem is not solely confined to teenagers in divorcing families. We find it everywhere.

It's just a little weed. What's the big deal?

Couples who don't get along will get sucked into arguments while the child engages in more drug experimentation. Teenage drug users are pros at splitting warring parents.

In my experience as a practicing psychiatrist and consultant in family court, this very common power struggle simply enables drug use and deceit, with one parent in the know and the other kept at a distance.

Herb and Trisha have gotten on the same page by openly consulting with each other, and have nipped the problem in the bud (pardon the pun).

But what would happen to Trisha if Herb were not around, or simply uncooperative? It can be tricky for single moms to confront certain subjects with an adolescent son because in the boy's mind, it can easily be reduced to a woman challenging his emerging manhood. Having a father like Herb set limits with Joshua actually reinforces Trisha's authority and improves the chances of long lasting compliance.

Be a Role Model

When you're doing well, so will your children. Kids flourish when they see their parents thriving. When one or both parents are struggling and dump their problems in their children's laps, things tend to become more difficult for everyone.

You can protect your kids by respecting boundaries and demonstrating restraint. No matter what age your children may be, set a good example for them! Protect their innocence. That's what an intelligent divorce is all about.

A Self-Assessment

As you navigate your way through the maze of challenges that divorce presents, it's vital that you evaluate your behavior and try your best to make whatever changes seem necessary. The following questions may require you to reexamine your own assumptions and perceptions. Answer them honestly because otherwise you're only fooling yourself. Check the number that best applies to you.

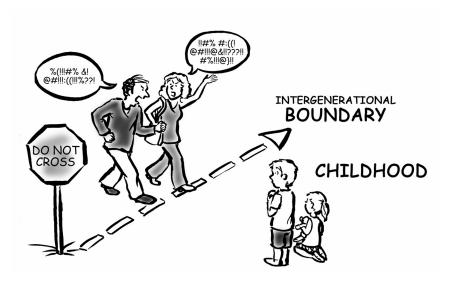
ing yourself. Check the number that best applies to you.						
$1 = all \ the \ time \ 2 = most \ of \ the \ time \ 3 = sometimes$ $4 = almost \ never \ 5 = not \ at \ all$						
Am I trying to become closer with my children because I'm too needy?						
□1	□ 2	□ 3	\Box 4	□ 5		
Do I feel that my ex-spouse is not a good parent?						
□1	□ 2	□ 3	\Box 4	□ 5		
Am I dumping on my kids?						
□1	□ 2	□ 3	\Box 4	□ 5		
Do I blame my ex-spouse for the divorce?						

Do I talk to my children about their other parent in negative terms?					
□1	□ 2	□ 3	\Box 4	□ 5	
Are my feelings	0,,			ction of my	
□1	□ 2	□ 3	□ 4	□ 5	
Do I want m their other p	•	to be on n	ny side an	d against	
□1	□ 2	□ 3	\Box 4	□ 5	
Do I try to k	eep the ch	ildren aw	ay from m	y ex-spouse?	
□1	□ 2	□ 3	\Box 4	□ 5	
Only you can determine whether your behavior needs to be reevaluated. While everyone's situation is different (and some of these questions may not apply), we can all benefit from a genuine self-examination. As difficult as it may be to admit some things to yourself (especially in times of stress), you'll be doing yourself — and your kids — a great favor by coming clean and moving forward. At the same time, you may ask yourself if any of these behaviors can possibly be a winning strategy for you and your children.					

	Notes	
This space is for you — to remem		nt, to doodle, to make plans

CHAPTER 2

Crossing the Line: Letting Kids Be Kids



In successful parenting, whether in marriage or divorce, the Intergenerational Boundary exists to protect and preserve the innocence of our children.

The Intergenerational Boundary

Imagine all the members of your family. Now imagine a powerful line situated between the adult generation and the children's generation. This line is called the Intergenerational Boundary.

Children must remain children. They are not meant to be exposed to parental conflict or collusion. They don't need to know too much about the adult world; there's plenty of time for that later. Our children are best served when they are not our friends. In successful parenting, whether in marriage or divorce, the Intergenerational Boundary exists to protect and preserve the innocence of our children.

This is easier said than done. Most kids are masters at breaking through the Intergenerational Boundary, using a variety of strategies. They include befriending a parent, splitting the parenting team, and pushing parents to the point of exasperation, where the parent just gives in. All of this can occur in the healthiest of marriages.

In divorce, Intergenerational Boundaries become particularly vulnerable. Parents inappropriately confide in their kids. Parents are often needy and the child can be thrown into the role of "parenting" her mother or father. Parents might vie for a child's closeness as part of a desire to hurt the other parent.

Every family functions like a miniature private society. We learn parenting from our own parents. In good marriages

this makes for useful conflict. One parent may deal with a particular issue better than the other and vice versa. Because many problems can arise that have their origins in the distant past, a divorcing couple should be extra mindful not to repeat old mistakes.

For example, some people reproduce what they've learned from their parents by cutting people off when they're angry or disappointed in a relationship. This rarely serves a purpose with one's own children or, for that matter, with the ex-spouse. Children shouldn't have to experience abandonment from a parent or between their parents. Kids can become frightened that if they do something wrong they could be cut off as well.

Whatever happened in the past to you or your ex-partner need not be repeated with your own children. Respecting the Intergenerational Boundary can help to guide your behavior and protect your kids.

EXAMPLEDiscretion Required

Luke and Janice have two sons, Chris (9) and Harry (7). Luke has moved out of the house and Janice is distraught about money. Luke hasn't left enough and appears to be hoarding or hiding funds that Janice believes are hers. She's anxious, and often finds herself on the phone with one of her girlfriends complaining about Luke.

In one scene, which happens frequently in divorcing homes, Harry, her seven-year-old, wanders into the kitchen to get something out of the refrigerator while Janice continues her phone call, railing on about Luke's irresponsibility and deceit.

"Luke is such a complete jerk," Janice says. Harry looks down at the floor.

"I can't believe I was married to him for so long! I know he's hiding money. Who does he think he is?" Harry puts his hands over his ears.

"Doesn't he care about his children?" Janice continues. "Doesn't he know that I'm watching out for them and I need this money?"

Harry hears every word.



"From The Couch"

When Janice complains about Luke right in front of Harry this is a real violation of the Intergenerational Boundary. Harry doesn't need to know that his mother is concerned about his father's greediness, let alone in the crude manner his mother has chosen to express herself. This conversation is for grown-ups only. It's way too much information for a seven-year-old.

How can Harry understand what his father's supposed selfishness really means? And who, by the way, is really the selfish party in this situation? Luke, after all, is not some stranger Janice merely dislikes. He is Harry's father. While Janice may be justifiably anxious about her finances, a seven-year-old doesn't need to know about it.

This can be prevented by Janice's dutiful attention to the Intergenerational Boundary. As soon as Harry walked into the kitchen, Janice's conversation about Luke had to stop. She needed to shift gears and start talking about anything but the divorce. After all, there's really plenty of time for Janice to vent her frustrations and get support from her friends while her kids are in school.

It's simple. You're the grown-up. Act like it. Think about your kids — first!

EXAMPLE *Too Many Questions*

Ted and Samantha have been split up for a few months. They've been living in different houses and the separation has worked out fairly well. But Ted is worried about what Samantha is doing in front of his daughter, Allison (11), and his son, Jake (8). Apparently, Samantha has a new male friend, Brad.

One day, while his two children are with him, Ted corners his 11-year-old daughter, Allison.

"Tell me what Mommy does with Brad. Are they together a lot? Do they spend time in the same bed?"

Most kids in this position would prefer not to answer. But Ted is anxious about his kids' possible exposure to what he considers an inappropriate relationship. He presses on. "Allison, let's keep this a secret between the two of us. Mommy doesn't need to know that I'm asking — and you won't get into trouble. Tell me, is Brad sleeping over?"

Allison doesn't know what to do.

"From the Couch"

This example is complicated because of Ted's feelings about Brad's presence in Samantha's house. His concern about inappropriate and explicit behavior in front of the kids is reasonable. But Ted has little control over what Samantha and her new boyfriend are doing together. Any jealousy Ted has may be coloring his judgment, and he needs to realize this before putting his daughter Allison in the middle.

Ted's opinion may be important, but as long as the children aren't being exposed to sexually inappropriate behavior his perspective is effectively irrelevant. Samantha is free to make her own choices.

Ted's anxiety violates the Intergenerational Boundary in two ways. First, his pushy behavior forces Allison to pay unnecessary attention to her mother's romantic life, and if that weren't enough, she now has to choose between her parents.

"Where's my loyalty?" She wonders. "Is it to my mom, and her privacy, or to my dad, and his concerns?" No matter which choice she makes, she'll feel torn and confused, and it's a loselose situation for 11-year-old Allison.

The Intergenerational Boundary is a key concept designed to protect the innocence of your children. There's a parent generation and a child generation. They are separate and should stay that way.

Triangles

In family therapy jargon we call Ted's attempt to engage Allison *triangulation*. This is because Ted, in his anxiety, forces Allison into a triangle by inviting her into an alliance with her father — against her mother. This triangle breaks the Intergenerational Boundary by essentially forcing an 11-year-old into the adult role of a confidante.

Children should never have to choose between their parents. If Ted has an issue with Samantha, he must deal directly with her. In divorce, when one parent gets a child to align against the other parent, it's always to the detriment of the child.

Children should never have to choose between their parents. Be aware of triangles. Try not to involve children in tests

of loyalty, both subtle and overt.

If Ted has an issue with Samantha, he must deal directly with her. In a relatively good divorce, Ted and Samantha can talk openly about Brad. Perhaps Ted could be reassured that things are not as they appear, or Samantha may realize that she is taking things too quickly. Both must respect each other's sense of dignity.

When this type of dialogue is not possible, a good therapist can help Ted and Samantha negotiate how to keep both homes wholesome for their kids. This method can protect Samantha's privacy and address Ted's concerns while gathering important data to keep Allison safe from inappropriate behavior.

In an even tougher divorce, Ted and Samantha may have their respective attorneys intervene in order to resolve this issue. This is an example of how valuable attorneys can be when couples are no longer able to speak reasonably with each other.

As you can see, maintaining the Intergenerational Boundary is not easy. It requires maintenance, care, and good planning.

Are You Identifying Too Much with Your Children?

A wonderful bonus of having children is how they put us all in touch with our own youth. For a healthy parent, this allows for empathy in suffering the ups and downs of raising children. However, for others, the boundaries between themselves and their children may become blurred. The stress of a divorce may cause some parents to over-identify with their kids and impose their feelings onto them. When parents lose the necessary objectivity they ought to be maintaining toward their children, it can lead to errors in judgment, which may prove quite harmful.

EXAMPLE Charlie Doesn't Get It

Charlie grew up in a rough neighborhood and an aggressive home, where he learned to fend for himself among a slew of siblings. As an adult, he hasn't lost the edge that worked so well for him in the past. When his 12-year-old son, Ken, comes home complaining about a kid on the school playground, Charlie expects him to take care of things with his fists, just like he did when he was a boy. He's convinced that his son wants to fight back. However, Ken isn't prone to such behavior and the school doesn't encourage it either.

Charlie can't seem to realize that what he did a generation ago in a totally different atmosphere isn't appropriate in Ken's current environment. Ken, caught between pleasing his dad and taking care of himself his own way, struggles to make sense of his situation.

"From the Couch"

When you really believe that you know what your son or daughter may be thinking or feeling, stop and consider that you may be imposing your own fears and wishes onto them. Your child is not you! They're entitled to their own emotional life.

Have You Taken Over-identification Too Far?

Parents who have been repeatedly hurt in their marriage and even more through the process of a divorce, have the extra burden of keeping that hurt to themselves. It becomes especially hard for the parent who sees their ex (the one who has inflicted the damage) maintaining a healthy relationship with the children. In some cases, the wounded parent may be so upset that they identify their ex-spouse as a liability or danger to their child (when that parent is perfectly fine), and in seeking to protect their son or daughter, they act inappropriately. Most people, when they feel wounded, have the tendency to share their feelings with whoever is closest to them, but when it's your own child this can break the Intergenerational Boundary and add unnecessary confusion.

EXAMPLEWhy Doesn't Amy Hate Her Dad?

Maria feels betrayed and neglected by her former husband, Carlos. Yet Carlos has maintained a perfectly good relationship with Amy, their seven-year-old daughter. Because Maria is so hurt and angry, she assumes that Amy should feel the same way. Amy doesn't understand why her mother can't stand her father. She loves her daddy and wants to keep seeing

him. But at the same time, she wants to please her mother.

Amy is fast becoming terribly torn and confused over a conflict that has nothing to do with her. She wakes up in the middle of the night with stomachaches. This is taking a toll on her and her mother.

Nevertheless, Maria fights for sole custody and reduced visitation rights in order to, as she puts it, "protect" Amy, a child who clearly doesn't need protection from this particular father.

"From the Couch"

Maria's effort to separate Amy from Carlos is understandable. It is tempting to want your child to share your anger toward someone who has hurt you so much.

Be aware that this approach can backfire. As your son or daughter matures, he or she may grow to resent the way that you handled the divorce. It is often better to allow your child to simply discover on their own who their mother or father really is. Unless abuse is part of the equation, this is probably the best course of action.

Warning: You're Only Human

When the mind needs to handle difficult feelings it may utilize a defense mechanism known as *displacement*. Sometimes it's a healthy tool. For instance, it is always interesting to watch a young child who uses the defense of displacement to play with dolls in such a way that mimics (and displaces) the difficulties she may have with her own family. She works out her anxiety in the magic of play.

But displacement also has a very dark side. Picture the guy who's angry with his boss and comes home and kicks his dog. He displaces his frustration onto his pet, who has little to do with what's bothering him at that particular moment.

Because you're probably facing a stressful avalanche of new emotions and an ever-expanding list of things to consider, displacement can occur at any time and possibly compromise your relationships with your children. It can even hurt them.

Even under the best circumstances, you may overreact to what you'd normally consider just an irritating child or a simple, common burst of adolescent behavior. When this happens, you may hurt your child's feelings for no good reason.

Or, even more unpredictable in its occurrence, your son or daughter may act in a way that reminds you of your husband or wife. If you're even mildly wound up about your ex — understandable during a divorce — then just the way your child looks at you, or says something in a given moment, may remind you negatively of your ex and set you off.

EXAMPLEGive Your Teenager a Break

"Jane, you aren't listening to me."

"Just a second, Dad."

"lane."

No response. Jane is texting.

"Jane!"

No response.

"Jane! Stop what you're doing and listen to me!"

"Dad. Stop yelling."

"Stop yelling? You are just like your mother."

"Dad, stop!"

"She never listened to me either."

"Dad, please."

"Maybe if she'd listened to me more we'd still be married."

"Dad, it's enough already."

"Why are you crying, Jane?"

"From the Couch"

Like Jane, your kids have enough to worry about without you mistaking them for someone they're not. So if and when that occurs, or when you're simply exhausted, be aware of your potential anger and don't take it out on your children. Identifying the true source of your feelings will help you to deal with them properly.

Handling Stress

Do I have the right lawyer? Will I be okay? How will I afford to live? I can't trust him with anything! She is going to take everything away from me! What is going to happen to the kids? Will I be alone for the rest of my life?

Stress is common to all people going through a divorce. The mind is filled with thoughts that won't let go. And, in the midst of all this, you have to parent, observe the Intergenerational Boundary, avoid triangulation, and try not to displace your stuff onto your kids. It's a tall order and you are not always going to get it right.

But it's doable. Take care of yourself during your divorce. Exercise. Stay close to good friends and the people who really care about you. Get therapy. It is good to have an objective person with whom you can process some of your more unpleasant thoughts. And, if you are relentlessly anxious or inching toward depression, you may want to consider medication for a short



period. As a psychiatrist, I frequently prescribe pharmaceuticals with good results. The key is to find a doctor you trust and find medication that works (you can find out more about this in Chapter 6).

Remember: Stress is inevitable; falling apart is not.

Healthy Children: Keep Your Eye on the Prize

We've discussed some of the common mistakes and errors that parents make during the divorce process. With about a million American children a year freshly exposed to divorce, it makes sense to anticipate problems before they arise. If every divorcing couple handles things a bit better — through awareness, perspective, and hard work — think of all the pain that can be avoided.

Don't expect to be perfect or implement everything we've covered. But you'll be surprised how small changes make a big difference.

Protect the Intergenerational Boundary and your kids will be spared unnecessary heartache.

We're about to explore more pragmatic issues involving your kids during divorce, such as when, how, and what to tell them. We'll teach you some basic elements of child development, including some research on divorce and children's well-being and some warning signs that may require further professional help.

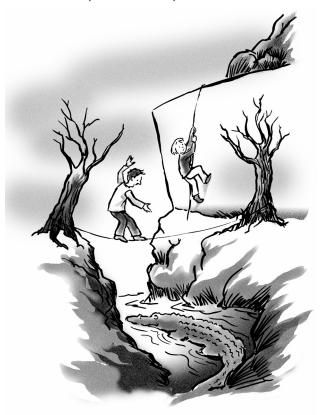
Kids have no template regarding relationships. We adults understand about love and its opposite — falling out of love. Most children know one image of a stable family and it's too much to ask them, no matter how old they are, to understand what their parents are going through.

Once you and your spouse have determined that you're going to separate or divorce, protecting the innocence of your children should be the guiding principle in letting them know what's going on in their lives. Not surprisingly, the ins and outs of telling children have occupied countless therapy hours in my office. It's a daunting task, for sure, but a general rule of thumb is, less is often more.

Notes	_
This space is for you — to remember what's important, to doodle, to make plans	

CHAPTER 3

Telling Your Kids: When, What, and How?



Divorce can feel like a minefield and an obstacle course, all at the same time.

Handling the Big Day and the Day After

Most parents can feel when it's a good time, if there ever is one, to tell their kids. Some wait until the divorce agreement is signed and they're ready to move, arguing that there's no need for upset beforehand. Others tell their kids soon after making the decision to break up, believing it will benefit the children.

Whatever your timing may be, keep your confidants (friends, family, and colleagues) to a minimum during this process. You don't want your kids to hear about their parents' upcoming divorce from any other source, and gossip of this kind often moves like wildfire. That's just one reason why it's essential not to drag your feet in telling your children.

Many factors will influence your decision regarding when to tell them. For instance, is it better during an unstructured time, such as a vacation, or during a structured time, like during the school year? I lean toward telling them during a structured time, but this is truly a parental decision and it's best when both parties agree.

It's Not Their Fault

Right from the very beginning, reassure your children that both mom and dad love them and always will. Tell them you're not divorcing *them*, and you will take care of them just as much as before. Explain to them that they will still be safe, and (assuming it's true) that mom and dad will both be available.

Make it totally clear that the divorce is not their fault.

The Big Day

Once you've selected a moment when there's plenty of time and no one is hurrying anywhere, you and your spouse (you should be doing this together, if possible) should take turns talking about the divorce. It generally feels safer to children if you present a unified front. Even if one of you doesn't really want the divorce, it's usually better to leave that bias out of your presentation. It's not the time to air out any dirty laundry, especially in front of your children. You may want to emphasize to your kids that the decision to divorce was not taken lightly and that both parents are feeling sad about it.

It's liable to be a very emotional time with everyone's emotions running high, so make sure you, as the adult, can keep yours in check. It's important that your kids see that you are in control and on top of things. In order to demystify the divorce and assuage your children's worries, provide them with as much practical information as possible. If you can, give them a time frame for the process and for the final arrangements concerning their new schedules and living arrangements.

Plan ahead for what you want to say and what you want to be sure about leaving out. Any information about their future — a house, a phone number, whether they'll be staying in the same school district, what their schedule will be — should be shared with them. The less they see this divorce as a life-shattering event, the less traumatized they'll be.

Once you've presented your story, let your children ask questions. Answer them patiently and calmly. Your attitude will mean a lot to them. If you present the divorce as a sad thing, but not as a disaster, your children will feel less distressed. If you present the divorce as the beginning of an awful time for the family, the children will worry about their own safety.

Parents can defer information as well. Be judicious. Share more with older kids. Tell them they'll be consulted on matters pertaining to their lives, such as visitation schedules. Stay conscious of their needs. All kids require reassurance, structure, and the knowledge that they are not responsible for the divorce.

Remind them that life will eventually get better. Tell them that the transition period, when mom and dad both need to figure things out, may be a bit confusing and hectic, but eventually things will straighten out and life will be normal again. It's the beginning of a long journey. Be hopeful and positive. Optimism creates power. When you believe in the future, it can be contagious.

No matter when, what, or how you end up telling your children about your divorce, make your best effort to insure that it's done collaboratively with your ex. This is an important moment in the life of your family and you basically have one chance to get it right.

Third Party Assistance

Many divorcing parents figure out what to tell their kids without any outside help. Others lack the means or the time to find support because their marriage broke up abruptly. But for those with the time or inclination, a method called *co-joint counseling* can be useful in keeping things calm and protective for the children.

The toughest part about all of this is talking to your kids about the divorce at the very moment when you are most vulnerable and least likely to act productively with your husband or wife.

A variety of professionals can help the two of you get on the same page, such as a pastor, a therapist, or occasionally, a family therapist. A neutral third party in the room defuses some of the intensity and can put things back in perspective.

My Story

In the weeks before "the big day" when my exhusband and I finally told our three kids about our approaching divorce, my anxiety was intensifying daily. We couldn't agree on anything: Whether to tell them on a weeknight or on the weekend, at home or in the park, and neither one of us wanted to speak first and actually say the words.

Finally, we agreed on one thing. We needed a referee and a guide to help us prepare. To make a long story short, it only took a few visits with a skilled mediator to make us both feel ready to move forward.

As much as we might not want to admit it, each of us felt better expressing ourselves to each other with a third party in the room. We were both happy that we cooperated on something so important. Best of all, our kids came through it okay.

Vivian, age 43

How Much Truth?

Isn't telling the truth a great and wholesome value? Of course it is. But so is protecting the innocence of your children. Maintaining dignity in your home is a great value. But so is expressing what you feel, when required. No one can tell you exactly what to disclose and what to keep private. Many variables exist in this calculus, such as the age of your children, how much they already know, and whether they may be about to hear something upsetting through the gossip grapevine.

If the decision has been made for you because one parent has left or an infidelity has been discovered, it may be obvious to your kids, and painfully so, depending on their ages. In these cases, it's imperative to gather your wits and talk to your children right away.

"Daddy had to go on a long trip," will eventually backfire.

Tell your kids just enough so it makes sense to them without revealing more than is appropriate. Some information may remain private forever. When you must share difficult details, do so from a place of intelligence and dignity.

EXAMPLE

Anita and Her Unfortunate Mistake

Anita can't bear the idea of breaking the news of her divorce to her three kids. Even though it's becoming more and more clear that her husband, Cam, is in the process of moving out, Anita still can't bring herself to talk about what's really happening, that their father is seeing another woman. She's afraid her children will be mortified and see their mother as a failure. Anita also feels that maybe if she doesn't say it out loud it won't be true. Meanwhile, her kids are starting to ask questions.

One day, Anita's frustration boils over in front of her kids.

"Your father has gone and left us all, that terrible man!" Anita finally blurts out one night at the dinner table. She begins crying uncontrollably, upsetting all three of her children.

"It wasn't my fault, I can tell you that," she continues. "And he's left me in a terrible mess, I mean a really terrible mess."

All three kids have stopped eating by now but are confused and afraid to speak.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Anita says, looking lost. "I'm completely alone with this. Your father has run off and I don't know what to do!"

"From the Couch"

Anita's ex is around less and less but she's been avoiding any direct discussion about it with her children. We may feel sympathy for Anita but her kids don't need to know that much. She may be feeling violated but it is imperative that she keep that to herself. She can talk to friends, family, a therapist, a pastor, or even an attorney. But not to her children.

Your kids have enough to deal with without worrying about their parents. Remember the importance of Intergenerational Boundaries. Stay calm and composed while talking with your children. They'll take their cues from you.

It will be damaging for your kids if one parent openly blames the other, even if the accusations are true. Many parents feel obligated to tell their kids everything, which is usually much more than what's necessary or appropriate. Too much information is usually confusing and can be extremely upsetting. Adults should control the flow of information. Don't put your kids in the position of having to take sides.

You may think you want your children to know that it was your spouse who wanted the divorce, but no real good will come out of this knowledge. This kind of dialogue is surely more than any child wants to handle or needs to know. Children deserve the opportunity to form their own opinions of their parents. You needn't prejudice them. Be the adult. Let your kids be kids.

Denial: What's So Bad?

Surprisingly to some, denial can play a positive role in our everyday lives.

In his book, *A Psychoanalysis for Our Times* (1998), Jeff Rubin, Ph.D., aptly refers to denial as "The Blindness of the Seeing I," explaining the ability of the mind to purposely blind itself to what it doesn't want to see.

Patients who are able to utilize the effects of denial while in a cardiac care unit have been scientifically shown to fare better medically. Perhaps if you or I considered how fragile our lives are each time we get behind the wheel of a car, we might become too anxious to drive.

In both cases, a dose of denial serves to protect us.

Children of divorce may use this facility to their benefit, as well.

Some kids can't help but see the truth on display in their lives, whether it's one parent's affair, an out-of-control mother or father, or a bitter relationship between two parents. When a child is not psychologically able to employ a healthy piece of denial he may very well have to endure the burden of navigating the realities of a loaded divorce.

Other kids may fare better. They may naturally live with a positive amount of denial, or they may be lucky enough not to be exposed to the worst of the divorce. In those cases, they can benefit by devoting their resources to growing up instead of protecting themselves from their own family.

Be mindful of your child's development and the bliss of ignorance. As children mature, they see the world with new eyes, and that includes how they view their parents. Some may revisit the issues of the divorce in late adolescence and early adult life and try to sort through it from a new perspective. The

effects of your divorce are ever changing and it will always be worthwhile to keep an open mind.

New Relationships

Children perceive relationships differently than adults. Since you were a teenager, you've witnessed couples coming together and breaking up, as portrayed in books, on TV, and in real life. You've seen how people suffer and eventually move on as part of the ebb and flow of life's relationships. That knowledge doesn't necessarily make divorce any easier, but it does make it more understandable.

Most children have no perspective for analyzing the end of one relationship and the beginning of another. They consider their parents to be the backbone of their existence and see the breakup of the marriage as the end of their family as they know it. Divorce threatens their day-to-day stability and sense of trust in the world.

If you find yourself beginning a new romantic relationship, a general rule of thumb is to keep it to yourself while your divorce is unfolding. Discretion is not only safer; it's a gift to your children. Introducing them too fast to a new partner in your life is asking way too much of them. Any new relationship should stay private for a good long while because your children need time to psychologically digest what is already happening. Anything or anybody who may be seen as competing with their mother or their father opens the door to a whole new set of unnecessary problems.

Controlling Your Computer

I've seen many cases of kids who have been injured because of their parents' misuse of the internet. Children are masters of the computer, often to their own detriment. Too many kids break into their parents' email or search through the history of their parent's internet activity. It rarely turns out well.

Be careful about online communications. You don't want your children burdened with, or shocked by, your private life. Whether you're soliciting internet pornography, chatting with a girlfriend about your anger toward your children's father, or having a secret relationship, don't be surprised if your kids tap into any of your computer activities. All of this demands your strict attention and utmost discretion.

Don't Forget That They Remember

Adults tend to say and do things and then forget them the next day. We know when we are joking, when we are momentarily angry or sad, and understand that not everything is meant in a serious way. We forget. Not so with children.

EXAMPLEThe Sperm Donor

Gary left his wife, Carolyn, for another woman. Preoccupied by his new "lease on life," he often neglected his three year-old daughter, Rachel. This left Carolyn feeling irate and bitter. In fact, she had trouble keeping her thoughts to herself. As a result, Rachel often overheard some rather spicy conversations between Carolyn and her friends.

"I can't believe what Gary did to you," Carolyn's friend, April complained.

"Don't refer to him as Gary," Carolyn replied. "It's much too flattering."

"What do you mean?" April asked.

"Rachel's dad is just the sperm donor," Carolyn said.

April laughed. "I can't believe what that 'sperm donor' did to you."

"Don't worry," Carolyn said. "He will get his one day."

Four years later, Rachel, now seven, is obviously bothered by something. While she and Carolyn are preparing for her weekly visit with her father, Rachel speaks up.

"Mommy, why did you call Daddy a sperm donor?" "What?" Carolyn asks, shocked to hear her daughter say such a thing.

"Mommy, what is a sperm donor?"

"From the Couch"

Children like Rachel have uncanny memories but often struggle to put things in context. With that in mind, it's important to limit any negative moments and build good memories with your children by paying attention to what you do and say. For Carolyn, referring to her deceitful ex-husband as a "sperm donor" was gallows humor, and little more. For three-year-old Rachel, her mother's comment said something important about her dad, and the memory stuck.

The Day After: How Will Your Kids Respond?

Divorce implies change, fear, and loss, and for some children — relief.

Older kids tend to permit themselves to be angry and nasty. Younger kids are usually too preoccupied with deciphering exactly what this change will mean for them. They want to know where they'll be living and whether they will have to leave their friends or school. What they express upon hearing about the divorce may change from day to day.

Most kids will find a way to lobby you to change your mind. It's important to maintain the Intergenerational Boundary discussed previously. You'll have to watch your children over the coming months to track how they're doing. During this critical time, it would be wise to consult your pediatrician and your children's teachers in order to make sure that they are progressing well through the divorce. In Chapter 5, Common Problems: What to Watch Out For, you will be able to chart your son or daughter's situation and use it to inform their doctor.

Although at this time you're probably preoccupied with your own problems, your children need you now more than ever. They will learn from you how to feel about the divorce.

Take time to be with them. The evening is probably ideal to sit together, play games, read books, and talk. Ask about what's going on in school. Ask them about their friends and their thoughts and feelings.

Some children don't seem to like too many questions. They answer briefly and vaguely: "Everything's fine" or "School is fine" and so on. But in spite of their brevity they still appreciate your interest. They *need* it. Tell them you'd like to hear their thoughts about the way the divorce is affecting their lives. Over time, they may open up and talk to you.



Telling Your Kids

Do's

- 1. Make it totally clear that the divorce is not their fault.
- 2. Keep your confidants (friends and family) to a minimum during this process.
- 3. Do this together with your spouse (if possible).
- 4. Plan ahead for what you want to say.
- 5. Provide as much practical information as possible.
- 6. Control your feelings and stay on top of things.
- 7. Let your children ask questions.
- 8. Remind them that life will eventually get better.
- 9. Be hopeful and positive.
- 10. Be the adult. Let your kids be kids.

Don'ts

- 1. Don't drag your feet in telling your children.
- 2. Don't let anyone else announce the news.
- 3. Don't play the blame game. There's probably plenty to go around.
- 4. Don't air your dirty laundry in front of your kids.
- 5. Don't let your emotions get the best of you.
- 6. Don't reveal more than is appropriate.
- 7. Don't lie. It will always catch up to you later.
- 8. Don't put your kids in the position of having to take sides.
- 9. Don't forget to remind them that your divorce is not their fault.
- 10. Don't improvise. You have one chance to get it right.

Notes	
This space is for you — to remember what's importa to record your children's response to the ne	nt, to doodle, to make plans,
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Growing Up With Divorce

What to Watch Out For

Every parent must learn child development and most of us do it on the fly.

There are critical phases in which kids develop. For instance, in the first two to three years of life, children internalize the notion of being cared for in a consistent way. Erik Erikson, the great theoretician of child development, calls this *Basic Trust*, the sense that the world is reliable and can be counted on. This doesn't mean that Basic Trust cannot develop further down the road. It just means that a child's first three years of life is an important time during which fundamental developmental tasks can be accomplished.

Naturally, our children become more vulnerable during a divorce, and it's imperative that we understand the nature of their changing behavior when they are being placed at risk.

For instance, kids regress. While they may be doing fine in some aspects of development (the ability to be alone, the capacity to self-start, or the ability to handle academics) their behavior can also become quite uneven. Under stress, many kids can fall back into patterns consistent with a younger age. These ebbs and flows are normal at many stages of development but may become accentuated under the pressures divorce can present.

Remember, everyone's entitled to bad days.

It's important to cultivate your eye to watch out for questionable behavior without, at the same time, succumbing to knee-jerk reactions you may later regret. Bad days don't necessarily indicate significant psychological problems.

For example, in the midst of your divorce your 10-yearold son begins to occasionally wet his bed. This, by itself, is probably not a reason for alarm. He's entitled to a moment of regression here and there. If, on the other hand, this becomes a daily occurrence, then you'll need to consult your pediatrician.

The next three chapters will introduce the basics of child development and the risk factors that divorce presents, specifically how you can recognize what is happening to your child and, when necessary, what you can do to help.