

## Divorce Do's and Don'ts

*Developed by the "Theories and Principles of Parenting" class (HDFS 421) Spring 2006*

Divorcing parents have a lot on their minds. One big thing that parents who are separating or divorcing worry about is the effect of their decision on their children. Although all children are changed by divorce, it can be helpful for parents to remember that children from divorced families are just as well adjusted and achieve just as well in school and life as children from intact families. All children need extra love and support during and after family transitions. Following are some suggestions for ways in which divorcing or divorced parents can provide that support to their children.

### *For Children of All Ages*

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Let children know they are loved</li><li>• Tell children about the divorce beforehand so they have time to think and ask questions rather than having to respond to a crisis</li><li>• Emphasize the things in children's lives that will stay the same</li><li>• Be sure children know the divorce is not their fault</li><li>• Ask about children's fears and concerns - and listen to what they say</li><li>• Take children's concerns seriously even if they do not seem to you to be major issues</li><li>• Accept that children will feel sad and angry</li><li>• Spend some time alone with each child in the family</li><li>• Encourage your child's relationship with his or her other parent</li><li>• Continue to provide structure at home and enforce reasonable rules and limits</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dismiss or diminish children's negative emotions and fears</li><li>• Criticize your child's other parent or stepparent</li><li>• Give false hopes that the separation or divorce is temporary</li><li>• Argue with your former spouse in front of your children</li><li>• Rely on children for emotional support</li><li>• Become too lenient and let children do things they would not have been allowed to do before the divorce</li><li>• Get angry with children if they are rude to a new romantic partner</li><li>• Make children feel guilty for spending time with their other parent (and for enjoying that time)</li><li>• Expect a child to "get over" the divorce</li></ul>

*When Children are Infants or Toddlers*

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be affectionate and involved</li><li>• Expect sadness and behavior changes</li><li>• Be sensitive to your child's fears at separation</li><li>• Maintain normal family schedules and routines as much as possible</li><li>• Let other people who care for your child know about the situation so they can also offer extra love and support</li><li>• Get some sleep</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make a lot of changes in routines and the environment all at once</li><li>• Become preoccupied with adult concerns so that your child is not receiving your full attention</li><li>• Become impatient with your child's sadness or anger</li><li>• Blame your child when he or she shows distress or regresses to thumb-sucking or night waking</li><li>• Give up on enforcing rules or drop your expectations for your child's behavior</li></ul>

*When Children are Preschoolers*

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make it very clear to your child that the divorce is not his or her fault</li><li>• Expect your child to be sad and to question the need for the divorce</li><li>• Explain all arrangements in language your child can understand</li><li>• Encourage children to talk about their worries and fears</li><li>• Be clear to your child that he or she will be cared for</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discourage your child's expression of negative feelings</li><li>• Act as though nothing is happening</li><li>• Say negative things about your child's other parent</li><li>• Become lax in expecting your child to meet your usual standards of behavior</li><li>• Change regular family routines</li></ul>

*When Children are in Elementary School*

<b>Do's</b>	<b>Don'ts</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Support your child's continuing relationship with his or her other parent</li><li>• Maintain a high level of involvement in your child's life</li><li>• Consult your child about visitation plans and arrangements to avoid conflicts with school activities</li><li>• Be complimentary about your child's efforts and successes in all areas</li><li>• Be clear that the divorce is final and permanent</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assume your child can handle the divorce without help - consult a counselor if your child is showing signs of stress or prolonged sadness</li><li>• Interfere with your child's relationship with his or her other parent</li><li>• Expect your child to assume a large amount of household work other than age-appropriate chores</li><li>• Spend all your free time with your children - continue to develop interests and activities with adults</li></ul>

*When Children are Adolescents*

<b>Do's</b>	<b>Don'ts</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Maintain a high level of monitoring and awareness of your teen's activities and friends</li><li>• Keep family celebrations and rituals going</li><li>• Be alert to behavior changes that may indicate problems</li><li>• Communicate with your teen about issues of relationships, sex, and marriage</li><li>• Plan for your child's future education</li><li>• Use your teen as a go-between to deliver messages to your former spouse</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Treat a teen as a friend and someone to share emotional concerns with</li><li>• Discuss financial worries with your teen</li><li>• Be offended if your teen takes a morally superior attitude</li><li>• Introduce a new romantic partner without warning</li><li>• Drop out of your child's life if he or she is difficult</li></ul>

*When Children are Young Adults*

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue to provide support and help in the transition to adulthood</li><li>• Encourage the young adult to seek support outside the family - a visit with a counselor, a support group</li><li>• Expect your adult children to show anger and sadness</li><li>• Create new family traditions while maintaining the old ones</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assume your divorce is not an important issue once your children are grown</li><li>• Expect to get adult-level emotional support from your children</li><li>• Bring a young adult child into the conflict between you and your former spouse</li></ul>

*When You're a Non-residential Parent*

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stay involved with your child</li><li>• Develop a cooperative working relationship with your child's other parent</li><li>• Maintain consistent rules and regulations for your child when he or she is in your household</li><li>• Be flexible about visitation arrangements, keeping your child's best interests at the forefront</li><li>• Spend time just "being" with your child</li><li>• Continue to attend child's school and sports events</li><li>• Arrange child space in your home and keep toys, books, and clothes there</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Drop out of your child's life</li><li>• Become unreliable - if you set up visitation arrangements, stick to them</li><li>• Criticize your child's other parent</li><li>• Ask your child to take your side on any issue</li><li>• Make promises if there's any chance they can't be kept</li><li>• Spend a lot of money on your child as a substitute for your time and attention</li><li>• Ask children a lot of questions about your former spouse's activities</li><li>• Fill every minute of a visitation with an activity</li></ul>

### *When You're a Stepparent*

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discuss parenting issues and styles before marriage and continue to discuss approaches to parenting openly with your partner</li><li>• Make rules for the "new" family explicit and discuss them with children</li><li>• Let the child's biological parent be primarily responsible for setting rules and administering discipline</li><li>• Take time to build a relationship with each stepchild</li><li>• Set aside time to develop a strong marriage</li><li>• Communicate with stepchildren all the things you like and value about them</li><li>• Be prepared for jealousy between stepsiblings</li><li>• Establish new family traditions and rituals but don't let them compete with the old ones</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rush in to change things</li><li>• Expect to be accepted as a parent right away</li><li>• Insist on being called "Mom" or "Dad" if children are reluctant</li><li>• Give up on a child who is initially angry or resentful</li><li>• Criticize children's established patterns of behavior</li><li>• Compete with the child's non-residential parent</li><li>• Insist that things be done "your way"</li><li>• Make comparisons between stepsiblings' achievements, skills, or behavior</li><li>• Insist that stepsiblings become friends or do everything together</li></ul>