

In divorce, put focus on well-being of the kids

January 28, 2009

One in four children will experience the divorce or separation of their parents, and many will face serious adjustments. New homes and/or schools, and added financial pressures are all significant factors, but critical to a child's ability to cope is the opportunity to have regular access to both parents.

Communication is frequently an issue, often resulting in wrong assumptions by one or both parents regarding their children. Frustrated parents may refuse their children access to the other parent, and/or the non-custodial parent may be inconsistent in contacts with his or her children.

Unless parental rights are revoked, denying a parent contact with his or her children is illegal — even if he or she fails to pay child support. Domestic violence or drug issues sometimes are involved. As long as a child's safety is not threatened, he or she still can have contact with a parent, even if third-party assistance is necessary.

Sometimes children become "pawns" in parental battles. As parents seek to win, their children frequently lose. By supporting their child's contact with the other parent, adults validate the importance of that relationship, and minimize the focus on their own hurts or frustrations.

Parents can't control each other, and benefit most from focusing on what they can control: their own attitudes and behaviors. When adults — even when they feel disrespected — resist the urge to degrade the other parent in front of children, they demonstrate integrity.

There may be frustration with the other parent's lack of follow-through or availability, and the pain that this causes for children. While making disparaging comments should be avoided, adults should be careful not to make excuses for parental irresponsibility.

Non-custodial parents must persist in maintaining contact with their children, even if the other parent makes it difficult or a child seems to push them away. It may feel discouraging now, but perseverance generally pays off with deeper parent-child relationships later.

Parents should respect/honor the visitation schedule — both in showing up, and by being on time to pick up and drop off children. They should avoid making promises unless they can deliver on them.

Children need structure and love. Parents should make time with them as "normal" as possible, showing that they are more than simply a "Disneyland Dad" / "Magic Kingdom Mom," who constantly entertains. Kids feel safer and grow up more confident with a healthy balance between clear expectations and unconditional support.

Carl Nelson is a Child Development Specialist at Sumpter Elementary School and has worked for Salem-Keizer Schools for 23 years. He can be reached at (503) 399-3337 or at nelson_carl@salkeiz.k12.or.us.

Ask a question

Ask a School Counselor is intended to be interactive. Please send your questions to Debbie Doran, administrative assistant, counseling department, Student Services, P.O. Box 12024, Salem, OR 97308 or doran_debbie@salkeiz.k12.or.us