

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My wife and I were recently separated, and we're having huge disagreements about money and custody. She has told the kids that I don't love them, and that she will do everything in her power to keep me from seeing them. It's important for you to know that we simply fell out of love, and that I am not the ogre she paints me to be. I've always been a good father, and until we separated, she would have said the same thing. Our sons are ten and eight years old and having a very hard time, and I think her burdening them with her anger is making it worse. She is so angry that she won't even talk to me on most days, and asks the kids to deliver messages. When I try to communicate about this and ask her to keep the kids out of our problems, she just tells me that "I broke up the family" and that "there is nothing more to say." I don't know what to do.

-- Jerry

Dear Jerry,

Divorce is heartbreaking for everyone in a family, and can best be compared to a death. It is the death of a relationship, the death of the image and construct of family that you've each held. During a separation and divorce, both adults and children feel out of control, devastated, angry, hopeless, and helpless. Everyone suffers, but divorce can be hardest of all for children, especially when one or both parents place the kids in a loyalty contest. Divorce does not mean that children will be doomed to a life of sadness and dysfunction, but if adults do not handle this situation correctly, children can be badly scarred. This does not have to be the case. What is critical is to protect your kids from the conflict between the two of you.

Your wife may not be open to hearing this from you; nevertheless, you must communicate with her and come to terms with her about how this separation must proceed to safeguard your children. Consider emailing or writing if she gets too angry in your presence, and remind her that, in spite of the demise of your relationship, you both love your children and will do anything and everything to protect them. Acknowledge her feelings, but insist that you and she still have a responsibility to make every effort to safeguard and help your children. Let her know that you will not drag them into your conflict, and that you will never say a word against her in their presence. And then remain true to your word.

When you are with your kids be fully present. Pay attention. Listen. They are likely to have strong feelings, and you must make sure they feel safe in expressing these to you. Spend as much time with them as you can, and assure them that the separation is not their fault. Let them know how much you love them, and make certain that you tell them that you know that their mom loves them too. It's critical that they not be made to shoulder any guilt or responsibility for what is an adult conflict.

As you set up a new home, make sure there is special space for them. Even in a small apartment, let them decorate their rooms for when they will be spending time with you. This doesn't have to be expensive. It can be a trip to a discount store where they can select a poster for the wall or a new Sponge-Bob Square Pants bedspread. What is

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most important is that they know that they have their own place in your life. And, remember, you are their father, not a “Disneyland Dad:” someone who only takes the kids on extravagant outings. Your responsibilities continue to include discipline as well as love.

Offer a fair financial settlement with your wife. Don’t fight about “stuff, the kinds of things that could blow away in a hurricane. On the other hand, make sure you don’t let any feelings of guilt allow you to relent on your desire for frequent contact with your children. Talk with a mediator, and if that is not effective, work with a competent attorney to acquire joint custody or good visitation. Your boys need both their parents. There are many great books and websites offering information about how to spare children from the most devastating effects of divorce. Check them out.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.