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Children's Guilt and Ambiguity

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In a divorce or separation, it is common for children to feel divided between their parents. Sometimes, each parent finds it easier to blame the other, but this only confuses children and makes them think that they have to pick a side.

Unfortunately, it's not always easy to separate between what is relevant to the couple, and what is relevant to being a parent. In cases of extreme conflict between the parents, the children can become victims of their parents' suffering. Willingly or not, the parents can turn their children into messengers and instruments of blackmail. These situations often exacerbate children's feelings of guilt and ambiguity towards one of their parents.

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If the Divorce Has Been Smooth

Even if parents do get along, it may be impossible to avoid some feelings of guilt and ambiguity in your children. After all, joint custody is uncommon, and the children usually end up spending more time with one parent, than they do with the other. This arrangement could lead to detachment, if not handled properly. Also, if children witness strong emotional reactions, such as repeated, crying, shouting, etc., they may feel guilty about leaving one parent alone, or wanting to go over to the other parent's house.

Emotional Ambiguity

Young children often have trouble dealing with emotional ambiguity because of their inexperience on an emotional level. “I love mommy but I’m angry at her.”, is something very hard to accept and cope with. As adults, we understand it is possible to feel more than one apparent contradictory feeling, but for children it doesn’t work that way. They either like or dislike someone and that makes it easier for them to make sense of the world. When children are not able to do this, they may exhibit symptoms of emotional distress.

Helping Your Children

How can you and your ex help your children deal with guilt and ambiguity towards your separation? You are already on the right track! Since you are reading this, you have probably already realized that it is the responsibility of the parents to help the children. Your kids may experience guilt, which is not theirs to carry, and need to be guided through it.

Talk to Your Children About Their Feelings.

Let them know that there is no need to feel guilty, because they live with one of the parents, and listen to how they feel about it. If both parents can do this together, that would be ideal. If not, try to convey positive messages from both ends.

Keep It as Normal as Possible.

Even if the family is apart, it’s important for children to keep some routines in their lives, so the change is not too rough and sudden on them. Try to take them to school, or pick them up as you used to, or even tuck them into bed at night and then go home, for instance.

Strive to Distribute Time with the Children Equally Between the Parents.

After a separation, it’s not uncommon for children to feel abandoned by the parent that is no longer living with them. Talking on the phone every day, trying to pick them up from school, having dinner together, at least once a week, and having them sleep over at your new home, can minimize the effects of divorce on the children.

Show Your Children that their Parents Are Friends

This might not be possible in all cases, but If you and your ex can keep a civilized relationship, at least in front of your children, and still act as a team, it will only benefit your children’s well-being. It’s very reassuring for a child to know that they can count on both parents and they are not mad at each other, so there’s no need to take sides.