

## The Top 5 Mistakes Divorced Parents Make

WebMD spoke with family and divorce expert M. Gary Neuman, who gives exes pointers on how to split up without emotionally destroying their kids.

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Breaking up is hard to do. Divorce and its complications are the themes of Julia Louis-Dreyfus's hit Emmy award-winning sitcom, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, in which she plays a newly single mom facing the challenges of dating again, a host of custody and parenting issues, and an ex-husband who is still very much in her life.

Although her own marriage -- with two kids -- to writer-producer Brad Hall is still going strong at 21 years, the actress is mining emotions she is familiar with. Her parents divorced when she was a child, and she was shuffled back and forth between their homes in Washington, D.C., and New York City. While her parents kept it civil and Louis-Dreyfus remains close to her mother, father, and their respective "new" spouses, many kids of divorce have it much tougher. Some are asked to broker peace between warring exes, even as they are grieving the loss of a parent who has abruptly moved out. Others must deal with parents who suddenly can't cope with everyday tasks, like making dinner or helping with homework.

Many children take the battle scars of divorce well into adulthood -- wounds that never needed to be inflicted in the first place. But broken-up spouses can help stop the damage done by managing their own behavior before the ink dries on the divorce papers. ***WebMD spoke with family and divorce expert M. Gary Neuman, LMHC, who gives exes pointers on how to split up without emotionally destroying their kids long term.***

### 1. Don't make your child the messenger ...

"Too many parents attempt to communicate through their children, which causes undue emotional stress on them and forces them to negotiate a situation their own parents could not handle," says Neuman. "Email is an excellent tool nowadays to communicate with your ex-spouse. It allows you to specifically discuss the practicalities of raising your child without detouring into negative areas and opening old wounds. It also provides a recorded message, admissible into court, so parents tend to be more careful when using it.

If you want or need to speak with your ex over the phone or in person, be focused and stay on task, and most important, don't swallow the bait if he or she descends into anger. Simply say, 'I appreciate your feelings, but I am here to discuss our child's school assignment.' Take the high road. Your child's emotional health depends on it."

### 2. ... or your therapist.

"Teenagers like to feel in control, and divorce turns their worlds upside down," Neuman says. "Don't fall into the trap of sharing divorce details or your angry feelings about your ex with your older kids. Their own anxiety and need for control causes them to be 'understanding' of what you're going through, but you need to be the parent. Get outside help for yourself, get therapy if necessary, and maintain those boundaries. Making your child your cohort is wrong and does them damage."

### 3. Try to "get" your kid.

"Kids need to feel as if they are understood," says Neuman, and after a divorce their feelings may in turmoil. "Listen to them. Don't tell them what to think. And it might be difficult, but never criticize your ex -- it's a criticism of your child, who of course is 50% of your ex-husband or wife. Respond specifically to what they are telling you. Say, 'It sounds like you are feeling sad/mad/upset about meeting your dad's new girlfriend, is that right?' As a parent, you don't have to have a solution, you just need to hear them.

And don't editorialize. You can suggest your child write down his feelings and share them with your ex, but only if the child wants to do so. Stay trained on *your child's* feelings, not yours. Healing comes through a loving connection, and from feeling understood."

#### **4. Avoid the third degree.**

"I tell parents to treat their child's weekend away with their ex-spouse as if the child has just visited an aunt or uncle," advises Neuman. "Saying nothing will leave your child stressed, as if he must compartmentalize both worlds and tiptoe around this other experience. On the other hand, grilling the child puts him squarely in the middle, which is an impossible position emotionally. So ask your kid fun and general questions, which diffuses tension. And then let it go."

#### **5. Repair the damage you've already done.**

Many divorced parents reading these tips may recognize mistakes they've unintentionally made with their own kids. Is it ever too late to undo emotional fall-out from a nasty split? "No, children are remarkably forgiving, says Neuman. "At least until they reach their later teen years, when anger may be more cemented. If you've made mistakes, it's important to do the following:

- Apologize for them. Saying you're sorry goes a long way with your kids.
- Explain in detail exactly what you've done wrong, and then commit to changing your behavior from that moment on.
- Give your child a safe and specific signal -- for example, tell your child to raise his or her hand when you begin criticizing your ex -- which serves as a time-out for *you*, telling you in no uncertain terms you're doing it again and need to stop immediately."

Source:

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