

The 10 Commandments of Divorce

By Suzy Yehl Marta, President and Founder of Rainbows

1 Help your children honor their non-residential parent. This means buying birthday presents and not saying anything demeaning -- ever - - even if it kills you and sometimes it will. Your children will respect and love you for taking the high road.

Acknowledge your loss. Take time to talk to the children about the changes that have occurred because Mom and Dad are divorced. Ask the children how they feel and listen to what they say. If you cannot talk to your children about the divorce, find a trusted adult -- teacher, neighbor, relative -- who can establish strong personal communication with your children.

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3 Re-create the family. When a spouse moves out of the home, you cannot pretend to be the same family with just one person missing. You must rebuild into a new family unit.

Be conscious of your feelings. Your attitude toward your former spouse sets the tone for your children. An undercurrent of animosity or anxiety will torpedo their opportunity for a good relationship with the non-residential parent. Always put the emotional needs of your children first. Dispel your own negative feelings in a heart-to-heart talk with a close friend or compassionate adult relative. Don't burden the children.

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5 Date with caution. Simply put, from a child's perspective - parents don't date! In fact, there's a good chance your children are still trying to figure out how they can get Mom and Dad back together again. So when you introduce a third person into the picture, it comes as a major surprise and devastating blow to them. Keep things as casual and neutral as possible in front of the children; it's very awkward for them to see a parent get romantic with someone they consider a stranger.

Anticipate potential difficult moments. There may be times when the non-residential parent doesn't show up at an important event, is late for a visit, or forgets a birthday. Don't be accusatory or judgmental. Instead, your role is to provide your children with the opportunity to talk about how they're feeling.

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Keep your children connected with extended relatives. Despite a divorce or separation, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are still family members. Invite them to parties, graduations, and special school events. Send them current photos of the children. Have the children send cards. Before a family gathering or visit, make sure everyone understands that the children and family ties are the focus of the get-together. If there's bitterness because of a separation or divorce, establish clear-cut ground rules up front that prohibit name-calling, taking sides or verbal bashing of any family members.

Spend time alone daily with each of your children. Set aside ten minutes every day for each child. Ask specific questions, such as: How was school? Was one class really good or bad today? Who did you eat lunch with today? Occasionally these talks lead to deeper conversations. When a crisis occurs, your children know there will be time for them to talk to you about it.

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Be realistic about your capabilities. Accept that as a single parent you can't do everything. Prioritize your family's needs and make choices. Explain the decisions to your children. The most important memory you can give your children is time spent together. An afternoon at a ball game or picnic will mean more to them than you may imagine.

Take time for yourself. Vacations and long-weekends away from home are fantasies for most single parents. But regularly scheduled breaks are doable. Set aside at least 30 minutes every few days to do something you personally enjoy, such as walking, reading, and exercising or watching television. Taking time for you sounds self-serving. Ultimately, however, you gain patience and perspective - two tools you need for the daunting but rewarding challenge of being a single parent.

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