

Top Ten Tips for Fostering Children's Resilience after Divorce*

by JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D.

* Originally published in the "Ask the Experts" Column, Association of Family and Conciliation Courts eNEWS, March 2010.

How children fare during and after a divorce depends largely on how parents handle changes and create quality of life for their children over time. Many factors influence their resilience; research and clinical practice have shown these to be among the most important.

1. Tell and show them you love them. Repeat very often. Reassure children that the love you have for them will never end—and then back it up with your behavior. Children crave parents' physical expressions of affection along with words of love, encouragement and reassurance.

2. Prepare children for changes. Begin by telling them about what will and will not change for them as a result of the divorce. "Telling" is not a one-time event. Continue the conversation over time, as family changes continue to occur. An open line of communication is a life line for children, especially during turbulent times.

3. Strengthen your relationship with your children. Do not allow your divorce from your former partner to become a divorce from your children or your role as their parent. Create frequent, regular, one-on-one time with each child. Use play and other enjoyable activities to build closer emotional bonds and express your love and reassurance. Noticing and expressing appreciation for your children's positive behaviors and acts of kindness creates good will that fuels hope, optimism, and loving relationships.

4. Help your children identify their emotions, and respond with empathy. Children often hide their real feelings about a divorce, but by listening carefully, you can help them to explore, understand, and label their emotions. Neuroscience research has shown that labeling emotions has powerful therapeutic effects in the brain. Your empathy for what they are experiencing also helps children cope with powerful feelings.

5. Contain conflict. On-going conflict is poisonous for children, emotionally, socially and physically, and it erodes positive parenting. Never let your children witness violent or hostile behavior or hear you denigrate your former partner. Avoid putting your children in the middle of your problems or creating situations where they feel they must choose between their parents.

6. Share parenting, if it is safe to do so. Your children benefit from two responsible parents. Reframe your relationship with your former spouse as a "business" partnership whose sole focus is your children's well-being. Use legal options and experienced therapists to help you and your former partner keep your children's needs a top priority and create effective parenting plans.

7. Support and encourage your child’s safe and healthy relationship with both parents.

Nurture your children’s healthy relationship with their other parent. When problems arise between them, help your children discuss it respectfully and help them find ways to ease their distress and learn to problem-solve. Do not burden children with adult problems that contribute to loyalty conflicts and alliances with one parent at the expense of a healthy relationship the other.

8. Focus on what is in your control and strive for consistent, quality parenting.

Research shows that warmth, nurturing and empathy along with effective and consistent discipline, rules and limits is related to better adjustment for children and teens. Children need and want consistent limits in both of their homes. Knowing how they are expected to behave gives children a sense of control over their own behavior and their lives. They feel a basic sense of trust and security, even as they learn new skills within a loving structure.

9. Teach and model resilience skills.

The skills that influence resilience are well defined. Explain and practice: age appropriate understanding and acceptance of family changes, problem solving, coping skills, understanding and managing emotions, differentiating between what can and cannot be controlled, expressing empathy, and fostering hope, competence and confidence. A supportive relationship with caring adults is an essential contributor to resilience. Reach out for support and get help when needed. Resilient children are connected through faith, friends, family, nurturing communities and supportive resources. Support your child’s healthy relationships with other caring adults and mentors.

10. Provide household structure, routine and traditions that children enjoy—including family time together.

Reducing the number of major changes in a child’s life and having consistent structure at home helps children to feel safer and more secure when their lives have changed dramatically. Regular bedtimes, meals together, limits on “screen time,” and plenty of quality time as a family are all factors that have proven to positively influence better social and emotional adjustment.

JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and child specialist based in Rochester, New York. She is the award-winning author of Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies for Helping Children Thrive after Divorce. Avery/Penguin, 2010. NAPPA Gold Award, National Parenting Publications Awards.