

1.

Child Focused or Out of Focus

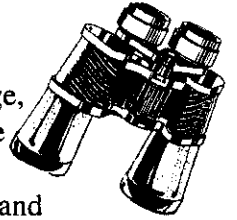
Making The Commitment to Caring



Parents do care; they care tremendously. There is no doubt that parents make decisions, take risks, and meet challenges in the best interest of their children. The decision itself to divorce may have been taken in order to protect him or her from the ongoing battle during the marriage.

Child Focused or Out of Focus?

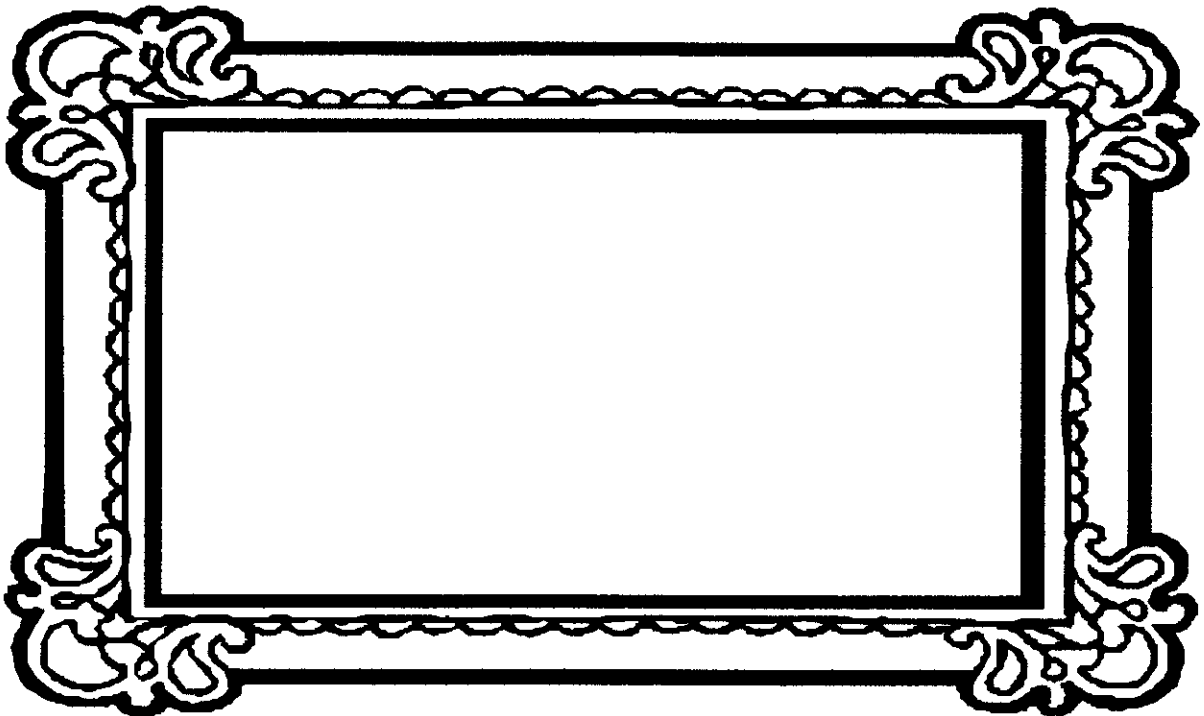
Although you may differ from other parents who are reading this book in age, background, or even in some of your values, you probably share with them one central belief: You love your child and would not knowingly do anything to hurt him or her. This strongly held belief is so important to your child's success and yours that we want to keep this image clearly in focus as you journey through this book. To keep the focus on the love you have for your child(ren), carry out the following activity.



Child Focus Activity

Find a photo of each of your children and paste it in the frame below. (or use the inside front cover if you have several children). It can be a current school photo that shows the child's missing teeth or perhaps it's a favorite photo of your child when he/she was an infant. It might show you holding or interacting with your child, or your child's face might fill the entire frame. Do this now.

Did you complete this activity? It might not seem like much, but it really is in your child's



best interest that you follow through. Return here often. Use this page as a starting place whenever you're in doubt, need encouragement, or need a reminder of the reason for your decision to improve your situation. It will serve as your focal point when you're evaluating decisions, your touchstone when finding your direction, your mission or purpose when you're choosing your day-to-day actions.



Why Conflict Hurts

Some children escape the trauma of divorce nearly unscathed, adjusting quickly to their new circumstances and going on to function well throughout adulthood. Others, however, are severely scarred by the experience and exhibit a multitude of problems years after the divorce. What makes the difference?

Research indicates there are a number of factors which influence the child's adjustment to divorce:

Age of the child

As the chart at the end of the chapter shows, the age of the child at the time of the divorce seems to affect the child's reaction to it. In general, children under five show their pain the most keenly at the time of the divorce but adjust best of all the age groups. They have fewer memories of their birth family and make the transition to step-families well.

Children in the next age group, 5–12 years old, generally react with hostility in the immediate aftermath of the divorce. Many signs indicate the degree of stress these children experience, with the most telling, perhaps, being the frequency with which their academic grades plummet the first year after the family breakup.

Teenagers don't wear their feelings on their sleeves, but there is often turmoil hidden underneath. Adolescents navigate the treacherous waters of divorce with trepidation, already dealing with the normal insecurities of peer relationships, sexuality, obsession about their bodies and normal separation from parents. The added stress of divorce at this time can precipitate serious consequences. Some act out, battling everyone and everything around them; others turn the battle inward and become acutely depressed.

So while age does not determine the long-term mental well-being of the child, it does profoundly influence the child's reaction to it.

Gender

The child's gender may indicate differences in his or her response to the divorce. Research shows that, in the first few years following the divorce, boys often have more difficulties in social and personal adjustment as well as in academic performance. However, long-term studies show that girls who appear at the time to adjust well to the divorce have more significant problems later on.

Temperament

A more consistent finding is the adjustment made by children with differing temperaments. The child who has an easygoing personality or temperament from birth, who has always adjusted easily to new food, strange places, and the next developmental stage, also adjusts well to the disruptions caused by the divorce. This "resiliency" characteristic allows them to move between households with minimal difficulty and to flexibly adjust to new patterns. Children on the other end of the scale, the "reactive" children, fare less well. These children (who were often colicky infants) who navigated each developmental stage as though they were in stormy waters are more inflexible when faced with the changes forced upon them by divorce. For these youngsters, divorce is a difficult life experience.



Diminishes the parents' role as "protector"

Rachel and her father, Robert, have had a fun weekend together. When Robert returns Rachel to the house where Rachel and her mother, Jackie, live, she immediately confronts him about her overdue support check. The confrontation quickly turns into attack and counterattack as Jackie and Robert volley verbal arrows at one another at the top of their voices. When their voices reach a crescendo, Rachel manages to "hurt herself," drawing their attention back to her.

What Jackie and Robert don't realize is the systematic damage they are doing to one of the most important parental functions: that of "protector." When children are young, the intensity of their own feelings can frighten them. They run screaming to Mommy or Daddy when they skin a knee or are faced with monsters in the dark. Mommy or Daddy calm their fears and soothe their anxieties, thus providing a kind of protection against real or imagined dangers.

Even into adulthood well-adjusted individuals look to close family members when they're upset, welcoming a parent's reminder that "Everything will be all right." However, in divorces where the parents long exhibit intense hostility toward one another, the parents themselves are the ones upset and out of control. They exhibit their own fears, anxieties and intense anger on repeated occasions.

This is terribly unsettling to the child. If the parent acts like a child in managing his or her emotions and appears to require protection him/herself, who will protect the child from all those dangers? Who will soothe and comfort him and help him learn to handle his own anxieties? Who will provide the security net against real and imagined monsters if the parent is in need of protection too? When the parent can't perform that function, the child is laid open to extreme levels of anxiety and doubt. He can no longer count on the security of a firm foundation found in his birth family. It's hard for him to build his own confidence on a foundation of quicksand.

Complicates the child's role identity

Eleven-year-old Tanya arrives at her Dad's house. James, her father, greets her: "Hey, you're right on time. Great. We can get to the gym before it gets too busy. Did you remember your bathing suit this time? Oh no, not again. You forgot again? We had planned to go tonight. Why can't you remember a simple thing like that?" Disappointedly, he adds, "You're just like your mother."

What started out as a positive, shared time between James and Tanya has suddenly changed into a disappointment for James and an emotional quagmire for Tanya. By reminding Tanya that she's like her mother in ways that he hates, James is not only criticizing Tanya but threatening her self-esteem. After all, he divorced Tanya's mother because he doesn't love her anymore. Tanya could interpret that message as "I'm like Mother, who's not worthy of love; therefore I'm not worthy of love." After all, the child is a product of the union of both her parents; therefore, she is already like her mother in many ways. She's female, shares the characteristic of being forgetful, and may share other physical features or personality traits as well.

When James compares Tanya to her mother at a time when he's disapproving of her mother, he is in effect telling Tanya that she is "not good enough." What will happen when Tanya



Adults often use the phrase, "He/she's always there for me," when they're describing a close relationship. Even though they have the capacity to care for themselves, adults too are uneasy about facing problems by themselves. So it's not surprising that the threat of being abandoned strikes terror in the heart of a child.

There's another dilemma here too. Rachel is frightened of being abandoned by her father but she's also angry at her mother for her role in the conflict. However, she doesn't dare show her anger because she too could leave. That puts her in the middle of a very frustrating situation. If she expresses her anger at her mother, it could hurt her more. If she doesn't get to express these negative feelings, the pressure could build until there's an explosion.

Puts the child in a loyalty bind

Marcus has just opened his birthday gift from his father, Charles. It's a skateboard. Although it's the one thing he passionately wanted for his birthday, no smile lights up his face. When his father, disappointed with his son's lack of enthusiasm, inquires, Marcus reveals the reason for his sad face: His mother's firm refusal to allow her son to have a skateboard. She thinks they're unsafe and she has voiced this opinion to both Marcus and Charles.



Charles is furious at his former wife's interference, loudly proclaiming that his son will not only keep the skateboard but will proudly take it home with him and use it whenever he wants. The expression on Marcus's face is filled with anguish.

Whether they realize it or not, parents have great influence on their children. Their values, beliefs, and standards all help a child set his own limits and influence his opinions. Children may argue but they are usually loyal followers of parental rules and underlying values. What happens, then, when divorced parents disagree vehemently and put their children in the middle of the fight? The child is placed in a huge **loyalty bind**. This forces the child to choose between one parent or the other. He's caught in the middle with no way out. Whichever way he turns he's forced to make a decision which will turn one parent against him. He believes that he can't be loyal to both. The situation forces him to take an action which will only end up causing pain.

What could be the long-term consequences? What happens if he gets used to choosing the side that causes him pain? He might choose the side of crime, of addiction, of promiscuity. After all it's the pattern he was taught by his parents.

You've Got The Power

If you're concerned about the long-term consequences of conflict on your own child, what can you do about it? Through your special relationship to your child, you have the power to influence your child's well-being either positively or negatively. As a matter of fact, the only two individuals who have this power are the same two individuals who have the power to improve the way problems are handled today. Either singly or together you can make a commitment to alter the amount of conflict in your child's life. No one can do it for you. No



- The reward of playing the a victim?
- The desire to stay connected to the co-parent even if only through conflict?
- The challenge, or even a purpose in life?
- To avoid fear of change?

What's The Cost For Cooperating?

Both parents and children benefit from a cooperative parental relationship. Both receive the advantages of lower stress, reduced anger, less tension and a more peaceful existence. While both parents and children receive benefits, it is the parents who bear the cost. What is the cost for cooperating? Parents have to give up the blame game and start taking responsibility for their own happiness. That's a tough stand and, for some, it's easier just to keep the fight going. But notice who pays the price: **the child**.

Is It Worth It?

Is it worth giving up anger and blame in order to ensure your child an improved chance for happiness and success in life?

Leap Of Faith

Making the commitment to a new parental relationship means leaving something behind in order to get something better for yourself and your child. But it comes with a risk. You have to get out of the old pattern and try something different. You have to leave your comfort zone and forge into the unknown. It requires a leap of faith. Have you ever seen a squirrel run up a tree and scamper out to the end of the branch, readying itself to jump to the branch on the next tree? To get what he wants, the squirrel has to leave the safety of his old position; he has to take that leap of faith. When parents want to get something better for their children, they too must take that leap.

Making The Commitment To Caring

There is no doubt that you love your child. You have always done your best to make the best decisions for your child. This is your opportunity to make another decision that is good for your child. Choose to "Make a Commitment to Caring." Choose to do whatever it takes to improve the long-term well-being of your child. Look back at the picture of your child at the beginning of this chapter. Is he or she worth it? You decide. If you are willing to make a commitment to your child you will be placing him or her on the first step to long-term well-being.

The remaining chapters in this book will guide you in taking the seven additional steps to achieve this goal. On page 13 you will see an outline of these steps.

**STOP READING AND COMPLETE THE
"COMMITMENT TO CARING" ON THE NEXT PAGE.**



8 STEPS TO MY CHILD'S POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

STEP 8:

Cooperation or Conflict:
Co-parenting is forever

STEP 7:

All a Winner or Winner Take All:
Negotiating agreements

STEP 6:

Defuse or Light the Fuse:
Taking control of conflict

STEP 5:

Neither Fight nor Take Flight:
Managing my own anger

STEP 4:

Make It Better or Keep It Bitter:
Choosing my personal path

STEP 3:

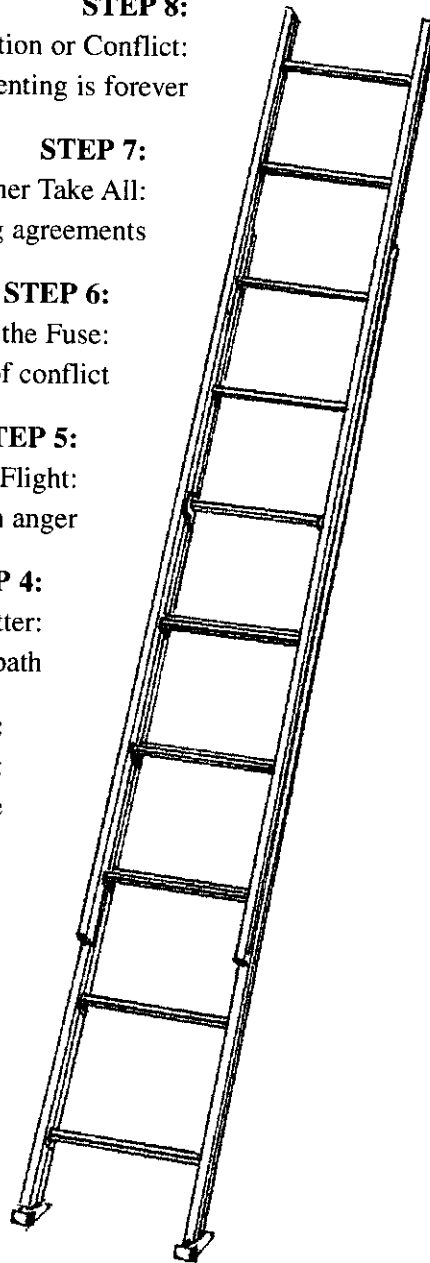
Letting Go or Holding On:
Changing my long-term role

STEP 2:

Plan for Peace or Tug of War:
Allowing my child to love both parents

STEP 1:

Child Focused or Out of Focus:
Making the commitment to caring





Create an Action Plan

Directions: Look back at the your “Hopes and Dreams” on the previous page. Put your commitment to caring into action by creating an action plan for making your dreams become a reality. First, determine how your behaviors are **interfering** with any of your goals for your child. For example, your child will not develop impulse control if you cannot model control when you are interacting with the other parent. As you progress through the next seven chapters you will learn alternative behaviors and the skills to put your action plan into gear. For now, just list the goals in the left column that you may be interfering with. Then add any **of your behaviors** that may interfere with your child’s positive development and the goals. As you learn new skills, replace your current inappropriate behaviors with alternative behaviors that will positively influence your child’s development. The first one has been done for you.

GOAL/DREAM	MY DAMAGING BEHAVIOR	ALTERNATIVE POSITIVE
1. My child will have a positive self-esteem.	I make negative comments about the other parent when my child can overhear these comments. This will damage my child’s self-esteem.	I will stop making negative comments in front of my child. When I need to share my feelings, I will call a friend.
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		





Divorce Rules

Directions: Post these rules on your refrigerator as a reminder of your commitment to care. Ask your child to let you know if you forget one of the rules. Never reprimand your child when he or she gives you this feedback.

Dear Mom and Dad, I'm just a kid, so please . . .

1. Do not talk badly about my other parent. *(This makes me feel torn apart! It also makes me feel bad about myself!)*
2. Do not talk about my other parent's friends or relatives. *(Let me care for someone even if you don't.)*
3. Do not talk about the divorce or other grown-up stuff. *(This makes me feel sick. Please leave me out of it!)*
4. Do not talk about money or child support. *(This makes me feel guilty or like I'm a possession instead of your kid.)*
5. Do not make me feel bad when I enjoy my time with my other parent. *(This makes me afraid to tell you things.)*
6. Do not block my visits or prevent me from speaking to my other parent on the phone. *(This makes me very upset.)*
7. Do not interrupt my time with my other parent by calling too much or by planning my activities during our time together.
8. Do not argue in front of me or on the phone when I can hear you! *(This just turns my stomach inside out!)*
9. Do not ask me to spy for you when I am at my other parent's home. *(This makes me feel disloyal and dishonest.)*
10. Do not ask me to keep secrets from my other parent. *(Secrets make me feel anxious.)*
11. Do not ask me questions about my other parent's life or about our time together. *(This makes me uncomfortable. So just let me tell you.)*
12. Do not give me verbal messages to deliver to my other parent. *(I end up feeling anxious about their reaction. So please just call them, leave them a message at work or put a note in the mail.)*
13. Do not send written messages with me or place them in my bag. *(This also makes me uncomfortable.)*
14. Do not blame my other parent for the divorce or for things that go wrong in your life. *(This really feels terrible! I end up wanting to defend them from your attack. Sometimes it makes me feel sorry for you and that makes me want to protect you. I just want to be a kid, so please, please . . . stop putting me into the middle!)*
15. Do not treat me like an adult, it causes way too much stress for me. *(Please find a friend or therapist to talk with.)*
16. Do not ignore my other parent or sit on opposite sides of the room during my school or sports activities. *(This makes me very sad and embarrassed. Please act like parents and be friendly, even if it is just for me.)*
17. Do let me take items to my other home as long as I can carry them back and forth. *(Otherwise it feels like you are treating me like a possession.)*
18. Do not use guilt to pressure me to love you more and do not ask me where I want to live.
19. Do realize that I have two homes, not just one. *(It doesn't matter how much time I spend there.)*
20. Do let me love both of you and see each of you as much as possible! Be flexible even when it is not part of our regular schedule.

Thanks, your loving child



My Parenting Concerns *(continuation)*



Elementary School Age (six to eight):

Reactions:

- preoccupation with feelings of sadness, loss, rejection and guilt
- may cry easily, act cranky, and be anxious
- distractible; difficulty concentrating
- decline in school performance
- complaints of headaches, stomachaches or other physical complaints
- attempts to actively reunite their parents (sometimes by having problems that force parental involvement)
- may assume the role of the absent parent in order to comfort or support the primary parent
- strong sense of responsibility to take care of their parents

What to do:

- allow your child to love both parents without pressuring them to side with one parent against the other
- avoid criticizing the other parent in front of the child
- reassure your child that you still love them and will take care of them
- let them know that they will still be able to see and visit the parent not living in the family home
- provide a sense of consistency (daily activities, bedtime routines, discipline, etc.)
- minimize the number of positive and negative changes
- reduce parental hostilities

Preteens (nine to twelve):

Reactions:

- may exhibit sadness, loneliness, insecurity, and feelings of helplessness
- attempt to undo the divorce
- tend to feel alone and frightened, but since they are easily embarrassed they may pretend to act cool
- complaints of headaches, stomachaches or other physical complaints
- may take sides and choose one parent over the other
- may feel and express intense anger
- have a strong sense of loyalty and may tend to rescue and side with the "wronged" parent
- may adopt an adult role
- decline in school performance
- friendships may suffer
- may engage in stealing, lying, or refusing to go to school
- may prematurely date and become involved in sexual behavior

What to do:

- talk about the divorce and the changes that will occur, but avoid the legal details
- allow your child to express his fears, concerns, and complaints to each parent
- acknowledge your child's anger and attempt to change those things that the child finds most upsetting
- allow your child to love both parents
- do not pressure your child to choose sides
- reduce parental hostilities



YOUR CHILD'S SELF ESTEEM!

