

Working with Divorcing Parents: Tips for MRE Practitioners

More than one million children each year experience their parents' divorce. Divorce is one of the most stressful experiences in life and is related to many physical and emotional difficulties. One of the main factors that influence how a child will be able to adjust is how the parents handle the divorce. When parents fight in front of children or put them in the middle of their conflict, the children are more likely to develop behavioral and emotional problems. They are also more likely to have poor relationships with their parents. This Tip Sheet will discuss some mistakes that parents make and strategies that MRE practitioners can use to help them change these behaviors. Teaching divorcing parents good relationship skills can help them co-parent and prepare for future relationships.

Restore a Sense of Self

Parents can become so focused on their own emotional pain that their ability to be effective parents is diminished. Some parents have responded to a divorce with behaviors that do not make themselves proud. They may feel like failures and need to have their own sense of self-worth validated. Have them reflect on both things they did well and things that they did not do well during their marriages. This can help the individuals both take responsibility for their actions and realize the good people they are. Have them describe the positive traits they see in themselves in their role as a parent, a son or daughter, an employee, a friend, or a member of a club or organization. This can also remind them of who they are as an individual.



Manage Emotions

In the beginning, emotions will often shift between anger, sadness and guilt. Parents need to understand that these feelings are normal, and they should be encouraged to feel the full range of emotions. However, making decisions based on emotions is not usually productive and should be avoided. This includes personal choices and decisions about the children. Remind parents to avoid using drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling or any other artificial sedative as a means to deal with their emotions. Such behavior could create bigger problems down the road.

Instill Hope

Help parents look back to other times in their lives when they may have handled difficult situations or problems successfully. The realization that they possess the qualities of one who has overcome difficulties in the past can provide hope that they can do it again. Remind them to refrain from continually rehashing past mistakes or injustices.

Also, ask them to visualize who they want to be in one year, five years, etc., and to make a list of what they can work on each day to make this goal a reality. Teaching relationship skills – concrete strategies to manage relationships, knowing oneself, identifying expectations for future partners and knowing how to break up – can help empower a divorced person to think positively about future relationships. Give parents time to grieve the marriage they left, but also instill a positive attitude about the possibility of a future relationship.

Manage Expectations...of Past Relationships

A certain degree of hurt and anger is to be expected in a divorce and may even help a person to emotionally separate from the marriage and move forward. The objective of working with divorced parents is to help them learn how to communicate and problem solve with their “ex” in a way that will nurture the child. Continued conflict with a former spouse keeps them emotionally tied to each other and does the most damage to the children. Parents must avoid putting the children in the middle (e.g. having the child spy on the other parent; sending messages to the other parent through the child; asking the child directly, or indirectly, to choose sides; trying to isolate the child from the other parent) and engaging in conflict in the presence of the child (e.g. criticizing or complaining about the other parent in front of the child; “getting back” at the other parent by not paying child support; not respecting visitation agreements; doing things to sabotage the other parent; engaging in custody battles). Children whose parents continually put them in the middle or expose them to fighting and criticism have the most difficulty adjusting and often have mental health problems well into their adult years.

...of Future Relationships

Not all parents will want to date again. But for those who do, MRE can provide a solid foundation for a fresh start. An ex-spouse will be part of any new relationship because of on-going involvement with the child. Similarly, the child is also part of new relationships. Practitioners should coach parents on the appropriate way to introduce children to a new partner and role play examples of their situation in a workshop setting.

MRE practitioners can help divorced parents establish an effective co-parenting relationship by showing them how to emotionally separate themselves from their former spouse. As part of the healing process and developing the ability to effectively co-parent, the adults involved need to feel validated, understand that the emotions they are feeling are normal and learn ways to reflect on the past in a positive way. It must be made clear that the children involved have the right to be connected to both of their parents. It is crucial for parents to reflect on how their children are experiencing the divorce and learn to co-parent effectively.

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