

# The Seven Worst Things to Say to Your Kids During a Divorce

By Chick Moorman and Thomas Haller

When you said the words, "I do," on your wedding day, the idea of divorce probably never entered your mind. Nor was it even a fleeting thought when you witnessed the birth of your first child. Chances are it never occurred to you at those times that one day you would be a statistic in the over 50% of marriages that end in divorce.

And yet here you are, considering divorce, separated, or already divorced. Today you find yourself dealing with issues of dating, visitation schedules, and feelings of animosity toward your spouse. You know that divorce is not the best situation for your children, but things have progressed too far to turn back now.

What do you do at this point to protect your children? How do you help them minimize the negative effects of a divorce? What do you say to them and how do you say it? How you handle yourself through the divorce process and the months that follow can be a determining factor in how well your children handle the struggles that divorce can bring.

Listed below are the seven worst things you can say to your children during a divorce. Avoid these and you'll be on your way to helping your children make the transition in a positive manner.

## 1. "If you behaved yourself more, your mother wouldn't get so mad at me."

Your child is NOT responsible for your relationship problems with your partner. Hinting that your child is in some way responsible for your divorce wounds the spirit and slashes the soul. Regardless of what your child has done or said, putting responsibility on them is totally inappropriate. Remember, a divorce takes place between the two married people in the relationship. Although divorce affects the children, you are not divorcing them. You are divorcing the person to whom you are married.

Even when you assure children that they are not responsible for the marriage breakup, most children believe they are somehow responsible. They think to themselves, "If I'd only been better, it wouldn't have happened," or "If I had just done something different, things would be OK with Mom and Dad."

If you really believe that your children are responsible for your divorce, then something is in need of repair in your parent-child relationship. Turn to a counselor, member of the clergy, or school personnel. Do it now. You and your children are worth it.

## 2. "Your mother is a tramp."

Name-calling in front of your children is inexcusable. Regardless of what she has done and how you feel about her, remember that this person is still your child's mother. If she has had an affair or done other mean things to you, it is not your place to tell the children about her behavior. Saying hurtful things to the children about their mother does not hit the intended target, your "ex." It hits and hurts the ones you still love, your children.

Name-calling usually stems from feelings of anger and disgust. Stay in control of your angry feelings. Attempting to knock your "ex" down in this way does not bring you up in the eyes of your children. When they hear you using these words about their mother, they can see and feel the discrepancy in what you are saying and how they are feeling. They begin to distrust your words, and

fear that you may be saying such things about them and their behavior. Their suspicion damages your relationship with them.

Kids need to look up to their parents. You and, yes, their mother are the two most important people in their lives. For years they have looked to both parents for comfort, support, encouragement, and direction. They will continue to do so even after the divorce. Speaking about their mother with words that are meant to wound only decreases the likelihood that they will look up to you in the future.

### **3. "What does your mother say about me?"**

Do not put your children in the role of informant whose job it is to keep you updated on the events and happenings around Mom's house. They are not conduits of information to be pumped for information. Keep them out of the middle and off the witness stand.

By asking your children to report to you and keep you informed you are asking them to betray someone they love. They are caught in the difficult position of having to supply you with information or lie in an attempt to protect their mother. When you do this, your children have to decide what might be appropriate information to tell and what information Mom might not want you to know. This is not a decision that a child needs to be making.

If there is information that you feel you really need or want to know, go to the source. Be an adult and ask your "ex" the questions you want answered. She has the right to decide what she wants to tell you. If she is not forthcoming with the answers, sit tight. It is quite possible that the answer will come to you without ever having to ask your children.

The main focus of your communication with your "ex" should be about your children, their development, and their continued care. Those questions that do not pertain to the kids may not be any of your business. Ask yourself if the answers to your questions benefit your children or you. Be honest with yourself at this point. If it only benefits you, let it go. Your children are what is most important.

### **4. "I want to get back together, but your mother doesn't."**

This statement may be true, but telling it to your children is nothing more than a play for sympathy. It is a subtle attempt to fix blame and make the other parent look bad. You are trying to place yourself in a positive light, as the only one who wants to keep the family together.

If this statement is really true, explore your role in how the relationship with your partner has gotten to the point where it is now. Tell your partner that you want to get back together and work on correcting the mistakes you made in the relationship. Your children have no place in that process.

If you want to look good and win your children's affection, do so with grace. Approach your partner with a loving heart. Model for your children how to separate and move on in a relationship without wounding the spirit of another. Show your children how to have an open heart even when you don't want what another person wants. Divorce gracefully. It is the best kind of divorce your children can go through.

### **5. "No, I won't give you any money. I send your mother child support. If you need any money, ask her."**

When you were married, did you sit down each week or month and show your check stub to your children? Did you share each aspect of the family budget with them, expecting them to understand the intricate nature of this system you designed? Probably not. They knew it existed and they became familiar with parts of it at times, but it was never a major concern for them. It was an adult matter that adults took care of.

The same holds true for child support. Your children do not need to know how much child support you pay and when you pay it. A child's request for money is not a request to be told about the family budget or about how much you pay for child support. Neither is it a request to hear about your financial troubles. If the money is not available, and there are times in non-divorce situations that this is also true, tell them that the money is not available right now without mentioning how much you pay for child support. Talk with Your children about what they want to do with the money. Help them create a plan on how to get the money they need.

The purpose of child support is to make available a percentage of the finances needed for everyday living. Your children need far more than what child support provides. Your children need extra love, extra attention, and, yes, extra money on occasion.

Don't get caught up in the financial end of your relationship with your children. Be careful not to attempt to buy their love with money. Instead, show your love with time and attention.

#### **6. "I'm sorry I didn't get you last week. I was really busy."**

When it is your evening or weekend to be with your kids, adjust your schedule so that you can give them your full attention. This may mean skipping the golf outing, rescheduling poker night, missing softball practice, or changing your hours at work. Create the time so that you can be present in your children's life. When it is your weekend and you don't spend it with your kids, they feel rejected. The message is that something has become very important to you and it is not them. Is that the message you want to send to your children? If not, then make your time with them a priority. Demonstrate to them that their time with you is the last thing to get cancelled.

If you are scheduled to have parenting time with your children and you don't show or you call at the last minute with a change of plans, your kids feel abandoned. If you take them to their grandparents' house for the day while you go on a golf outing, the kids question their importance to you. If you say to your daughter, "We can do that the next time we're together," and when next week arrives you don't do it, your integrity comes into question.

When you have scheduled parenting time, keep it. When you say you're going to do something together next time, do it. Your children remember, and they are building an image of their father based on your actions. What image of you do you want them to hold?

#### **7. "I don't care what your mother said. You don't have to do that if you don't want to."**

No two homes are run alike. With the establishment of two separate homes comes the establishment of two sets of rules. The goal is to create as much consistency as possible between your house and your ex-wife's house.

Arriving at mutual agreement on issues of bed time, homework structure, video game and television viewing, and basic rules of respect for others' boundaries is important. While this type of consistency is valuable, the reality is that it is difficult for many divorced couples to achieve. It takes setting aside your anger, resentment, and feelings of revenge, and coming to mutual conclusions about important issues that affect your children. It takes two people behaving like adults focusing on what is best for their children.

To say to your children, "I don't care what your mother said. You don't have to do that if you don't want to," begins to create an imbalance in the structure that children need, especially in times of divorce. The implication is that they don't have to listen to their mother, that she doesn't know what she's talking about, and that it's OK if they defy her authority. This is your effort to exert power over your ex-wife by weakening her power with the children. You are attempting to undermine her authority and are using the children to get back at her. This is not your children's job. Putting them

in this position gives them a sense of power that is focused in the wrong direction. A child's power needs to stay focused on managing their own behavior as they learn to make safe, caring, confident choices.

If you really don't think the children should have to do whatever their mother told them to do, take it up with her. Find out what was really behind her request or disciplinary strategy. If it is not a strategy you use in your home, talk to the children about how you handle similar situations at your house. Explain the differences in the approach each parent has taken, helping them see the outcome of their choices and the effect it has on them regardless of the house in which they reside.

Divorce does not have to be a devastating end to your family. It marks the beginning of a new family for you and your children. Focus on creating a new life together. Hold on to some of the traditions of the past and look for opportunities to create new traditions, new routines, and a newfound joy in being together. Show your children how to divorce gracefully by eliminating the seven worst things you can say to them during that critical time.

Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman are the authors of *The 10 Commitments: Parenting with Purpose*. They are two of the world's foremost authorities on raising responsible, caring, confident children. They publish a free monthly e-zine for parents. To sign up for it or obtain more information about how they can help you or your group meet your parenting needs, visit their websites today: [www.thomashaller.com](http://www.thomashaller.com) or [www.chickmoorman.com](http://www.chickmoorman.com).