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Do's and Don'ts for Helping Children Through Divorce

1. **Do make the divorce happen quickly.** It only takes one person to want a divorce. If your spouse makes that decision, move forward quickly. The longer you stay “stuck,” the more depressed, angry, and bitter you will be.
2. **Do physically separate quickly.** Once you or your spouse has reached a decision for divorce, you must be physically apart as soon as possible. The longer you live together, the more opportunities for increasing bitterness and resentment.
3. **Do allow yourself to grieve.** Your divorce is like a death, in that it is the end of certain traditions, fantasies, and hopes. Expect everyone involved to go through the stages of grief as if someone close to them had died.
4. **Don't talk to your ex-spouse in front of your children.** Because your emotions still are raw, minimizing your “face time” will decrease the battles. Every battle fought hurts your children.
5. **Do talk to your ex-spouse by phone, email, or letter.** These communication methods give you time to shape your end of the conversation with less emotion. Your ex-spouse will be able to respond more rationally if you are not physically present while he/she is hearing the new information you are giving.
6. **Don't use the courts to “beat up” your ex-spouse.** Every “punch” you throw is a punch to your children. They will be the true recipients of any bitterness, hostility, and fury with which you try to punish your ex-spouse.
7. **Do use your attorney, friends, and family as “sounding boards” before you retaliate.** Your communication with your spouse probably was not very good before the divorce, and it is likely to become even more strained as the divorce proceeds. Do not be the first to “retaliate.”
8. **Don't ever, even slightly, denigrate your ex-spouse to your children.** They love both parents, and they will grow to hate any person (even if it is you) who insults either parent. Your child came from the other parent, too. If you denigrate the other parent, it is as if you are denigrating your child.
9. **Don't visit your ex-spouse's home.** Children tend to be concrete, and they may misinterpret your association with your ex-spouse as “proof” that the divorce is not “final.” Children hold on to the hope and fantasy of reconciliation.

10. **Do create a schedule and stick to it.** Your children have had their sense of permanence and stability rocked. They need predictability and consistency.
11. **Do keep every promise and agreement you make with your children.** They no longer trust the world (or you), and you can best re-establish that trust by proving to them that you “keep your word.”
12. **Don’t expect your children to “act their age.”** Because of the extreme emotionality with which they must deal, they are less able to think logically. Therefore, expect them to react emotionally, rather than rationally.
13. **Do listen to your children.** They may need to rant and rave. They may need to review and review again their understanding of the divorce. They may need to discuss and discuss ad nauseam their feelings. Humans use words to control and make sense of their world.
14. **Don’t talk to your children about adult topics.** They are not adults, and they cannot process adult language, much less understand the implications or ramifications of what you are saying.
15. **Do create relationships with your children that are separate from your ex-spouse’s relationships.** Your children need to begin to see you as separate from your ex-spouse. They eventually will establish relationships with your ex-spouse separate from their relationships with you.
16. **Don’t believe that you have any say, vote, or input into how your ex-spouse parents.** When you divorce, you create two separate families, and you must realize that you cannot control what “the other family” does and does not do.
17. **Do support your ex-spouse as a parent and encourage your children to be respectful of your ex-spouse.** It is your job to make sure that your children realize they have a cohesive parenting team.
18. **Do allow your children to talk with the other parent on a regular, scheduled, and predictable basis.** Your children are reeling from having their world rocked. They need the consistency and predictability of talking with both parents, which it is your job to facilitate.
19. **Do keep your ex-spouse fully informed about health concerns of the children.** Withholding or not providing such information could be harmful. Your children need you to help your ex-spouse stay as involved as you are.
20. **Do keep your ex-spouse fully informed about school.** Your ex-spouse still is your child’s parent, and children need each parent involved in this aspect of their lives. You can facilitate this involvement or prevent it, but your decision will affect your children forever.

21. **Do pick homes in the same school district.** Obviously, it is not always possible, but living in close proximity will decrease the travel time and stress on your children. It allows them to take a school bus to either home, and it facilitates both parents being active at school.
22. **Do keep toiletries, clothes, toys, school supplies, and other personal items in both homes.** Minimize the packing children have to do. Lower their stress by making the transition from house to house easy.
23. **Do not think that you are divorced until you are divorced.** It probably is better for you and your children if you do not date until the divorce is final. Having the final “i” dotted and “t” crossed is symbolically powerful and will help you, and therefore your children, move forward.
24. **Don’t expose your children to your “dates.”** Your children are hypersensitive and should not be expected to be mature enough to accept every new “friend” with whom you associate.
25. **Do introduce the “one special friend” who is likely to be your next spouse.** Do it slowly and over time. Children need more processing time than adults do.
26. **Do not “fall in love” until at least 18 months after the divorce is final.** Although you certainly need adult attention, and it is completely appropriate for you to have your adult needs met in a relationship, you are likely to be emotionally off-balance for about 18 months after your divorce is finalized. Therefore, expect that your emotional judgment likely will be clouded during that time. Be cautious and defensive!
27. **Do share this information with your ex-spouse.** Ensuring that you are “on the same page” will promote your child’s acceptance and adjustment not only during this critical time, but also in the years afterward.