

University of Vermont

**UVM ScholarWorks**

---

College of Education and Social Services  
Faculty Publications

College of Education and Social Services

---

1991

## **Divorce Etiquette for Parents**

Lawrence G. Shelton

*University of Vermont*, lshelton@uvm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cessfac>



Part of the [Developmental Psychology Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Shelton, L. G. (1991, revised 2012). Divorce etiquette for parents.

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education and Social Services Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [schwrrks@uvm.edu](mailto:schwrrks@uvm.edu).

## DIVORCE ETIQUETTE FOR PARENTS

Lawrence G. Shelton

Human Development Specialist

University of Vermont

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Conduct both the business of divorce and interpersonal relations afterward so that when the children are 25 years old, they will look at you and say they are proud of the way you handled it.

Be polite to all involved.

Remember that you are divorcing the other parent, not the children.

Conduct yourself so your children need never be embarrassed or upset by your presence or your actions, especially when both parents are present.

Provide opportunities for children to express their anger and grief, and help them cope with feelings appropriately. Drugs, alcohol, sex, violence, depression, tantrums, suicide and the like are not appropriate expressions or coping strategies.

Don't criticize the other parent or step-parent to children, but do respond to the child's concerns and encourage the child to express needs assertively.

Be honest about the other parent's problems, but encourage the parent-child relationship. Be honest about your own contribution to the failure of the marriage. Nobody's perfect.

If you have a problem, such as alcoholism or a nasty temper, decide to get help for it now. And do it.

### Attend to Language:

The words you use convey attitudes and expectations. Families are not necessarily broken by divorce. Divorce is a change of structure in an already broken marriage. Broken refers not to the structure of a family, but to its *dys*-function. Families function well--are strong--or they function not well--are weak. Weak means unable to function under load, or having inadequate energy, or endurance, or resilience, flexibility. Weak has no necessary relation to the structure of a family. Referring to a post-divorce family as broken stigmatizes all concerned, but especially the children, who don't need to worry that they or their parents are broken. Constance Ahrons suggests the term binuclear family--a family in which the parents have separate homes. Consider your new arrangement as *binuclear parenting*, and decide to create the best post-divorce, or binuclear, family possible.

Legally, of course, the custody of children has to be established. But the term custody suggests that children are objects, or perhaps offenders, as in "in the custody of the authorities". Visitation is a terrible word. Children and parents visit each other after the children grow up and leave home. Minor children are parented. What you are really dealing with is arrangements for continuing parenting. So, instead of a custody agreement, write *parenting agreements*. Instead of visitation, arrange a *parenting schedule*.

Assume that everyone will mellow over time. And that they will change in other ways.

Expect former spouses to be parents first. People often live up or down to expectations.

Remember that former spouses are free, as are you, to live life as they see fit, in regard to new relationships and in the conduct of daily life.

But *commitments to children are primary*, people you date and new spouses have to be told this.

Learn to communicate clearly and negotiate fairly.

Limit communication to current and future issues, and focus on children's needs.

Don't talk through your children.

Avoid counting minutes, splitting hairs, and keeping score on your time with the child, or punctuality. Life is not an exact science. None of us lives on a strict schedule. Try to be flexible, even if the other parent doesn't appreciate it or reciprocate--yet.

Don't expect the other parent to parent as she or he has in the past, or to parent just like you.

Think about what you know about parenting and relating to your children. If you aren't expert in child care, brush up with a course, some reading, talking with others. Don't refuse to ask for advice or guidance from the other parent.

If you haven't been an equally involved parent, you may have to add some skills to your repertoire. Skills include discipline, nurturing, nutrition, laundry, teaching, dealing with tears, goodnights, baths, hair care, etc., etc. And there are a lot of etceteras.

Don't look for a new partner to take over the parenting so you don't have to become one. This is not fair to the new partner or the children or yourself.

Don't tell the other parent he/she will just have to prove he/she can do it without you. It's your child too, and the child deserves the best.

Don't undermine the other parent's parenting. You can disagree, but tell the children they'll have to learn to live with each of you.

Children see their parents as a unit. After divorce they have two separate parents. Encourage them to see both of you as individuals, as different people, learning & changing.

Allow the child to love the other parent and step-parent. They are not taking love from you, but adding love to their own lives.

Use respectful neutral language when referring to the other parent and relatives.

Use names as much as possible. When names are not comfortable to use, try using the relationship: "My first husband." "My son's father, or mother."

For step-parents: "Bill's new wife." "My children's other mother, or step-mother."

For in-laws: "Former father-in-law." "First father-in-law." "Little Sally's paternal grandfather." Or "My first husband's father."

Don't punish the children for the parent's misdeeds. A parent's human frailties should not deprive children of relationships with them or with the children's grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Recognize that just as divorce does not terminate parent-hood, it doesn't terminate grand-parent-hood, or cousin-ship. Severing the legal bond between parents does not dissolve the genetic bond, or the relationships established over one's childhood.

Include important relatives and even friends in parenting agreements.

Promote relationships with in-law relatives. Don't punish the children, the grandparents, or other relatives for the demise of the marriage.

Send graduation announcements, photos, wedding invitations, and so forth to the in-laws. Let them decide how and whether to reciprocate and whether to attend.

Be respectful of all the new people who may come into children's lives, including the other parent's new friends, or partner, or spouse, and step-siblings. Your children will be trying to create good relationships with these people. If you are negative toward them, you will put your children in the conflicted positions of having to choose between parents or having to try to deceive you.

There are, of course, many other issues that can be addressed. Please add your thoughts to this draft.