

12 Thoughts of Children Caught in Conflict

1. “I’m so ashamed. I’m humiliated. Other kids’ families aren’t like this.”

“Children believe they are responsible for all of the major occurrences in their lives—including parental fighting.”—Edward Teyber, *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992, p. 82.

2. “I’m scared to death. I don’t know what will happen next.”

“In a home marked by conflict and unpredictability, children do not have a deep and abiding trust in their caretakers.” —Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Divorce Wars: Intervention with Families in Conflict*. Baltimore: Port City Press, 2000, p.49.

3. “I need to fix this. It’s dangerous if I don’t.”

“Having lost the family as a unit, children are apprehensive about the future. . . . [S]ome youngsters feel they have lost any semblance of control over their lives. . . . Their fear and sense of powerlessness are heightened when children witness scenes in which their parents are at each other’s throats.”—Stanton E. Samenow, *In the Best Interest of the Child: How to Protect Your Child from the Pain of Divorce*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2002, pp. 19-21.

4. “This is MY mom and dad. I must have the faults they see in each other.”

“Parental conflict not only sends kids messages about love, marriage, and relationships, it speaks volumes to them about who they are. To a child’s ears, any comment about his parent—positive or negative—is a judgment of him. Any critical barb about your ex goes right to your child’s heart.”—M. Gary Neuman, *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House, 1998, p. 202.

5. “I need to figure out who’s right and pick sides.”

“[C]hildren experiencing intense conflict have to take sides because they can’t manage the internal tension and anxiety they feel. . . . This psychological ‘splitting’ as it is called, . . . is the most destructive emotional symptom that children might experience . . . because of the confusion and anxiety it creates.”—Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children’s Needs*. Atascadero, California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 20.

6. “I can’t talk about my real hurt and real fears.”

“Children also find it difficult to talk about sensitive topics and feelings . . . because they fear they might escalate the fight. . . . Instead, some turn inward, trying to make do with their own meager resources.”—Janet Johnston, Karen Breunig, Carla Garrity, Mitchell Caris, *Through the Eyes of Children: Healing Stories for Children of Divorce*. New York: The Free Press, 1997, pp. xiv-xviii

7. “I need to tell people what they want to hear.”

“In the battle between you, they learn to be polished diplomats. They’ll tell each of you what you want most to hear—not because they’re liars but because they want desperately to soothe each of you, to calm you down, to reduce their fears that you’ll become enraged. They’re afraid of your anger, they pity you, and they want you to feel better.”—Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *What About the Kids?* New York: Hyperion, 2003, p. 204.

8. “I will make one parent angry (or hurt) if I need or love my other parent.”

“In divorce . . . the choices that are put before children do not lead to a sense of control. Rather, they often lead to the child being placed in a position of feeling like they are betraying one parent or the other (or both).”—Jeffrey Zimmerman and Elizabeth S. Thayer, *Adult Children of Divorce: How to Overcome the Legacy of Your Parents’ Breakup and Enjoy Love, Trust, and Intimacy*. Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2003, p 61.

9. “If I weren’t here, this wouldn’t be happening.”

“Because they are often the centerpiece of their parents’ arguments with each other, to varying degrees, these children feel responsible for causing the disputes, yet must feel helpless to control or stop the conflict.”—Janet Johnston, Karen Breunig, Carla Garrity, Mitchell Caris, *Through the Eyes of Children: Healing Stories for Children of Divorce*. New York: The Free Press, 1997

10. “I can’t do anything right. I deserve whatever bad happens to me.”

“Children in high-conflict homes are more likely to view themselves . . . in overly negative and hostile ways.” —E. Mark Cummings and Patrick Davies, *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1994, p.5

11. “I’d do anything to feel better or to fit in.”

“Conflicts between parents are likely to cause self-destructive behaviors in children.” —Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children’s Needs*. Atascadero, California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 25.

12. “I don’t care anymore. It hurts too much to care. The world doesn’t care about me—and I don’t care about the world.”

“Ongoing postdivorce conflict reinforces the child’s belief that bad things will continue to happen to him or her in the future and that he or she is helpless to do anything about it.” —Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Divorce Wars: Intervention with Families in Conflict*. Baltimore: Port City Press, 2000, p. 197.

Lots of Research Only One Conclusion

“Without question, the single biggest problem for children of divorce is being exposed to continuing parental conflict.” Edward Teyber, *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (1992), p. 79.

“Empirical evidence consistently points to parental conflict as the factor that most consistently predicts maladjustment among children whose parents have separated or divorced.” Robert E. Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Child Custody, and Mediation*. New York: The Guilford Press (1994), p. 13.

“[I]t’s clear that children of all ages regard fighting between parents as their number-one divorce-related problem.” M. Gary Neuman, *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House (1998), p. 197.

“High conflict between parents not only causes children immense suffering, it causes serious problems in their development.” Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *What About the Kids?* New York: Hyperion (2003), p. 204.

“The level and intensity of parental conflict is the most potent factor in children’s postdivorce adjustment.” Carla B. Garrity and Mitchell A. Baris, *Caught in the Middle: Protecting the Children of High-Conflict Divorce*. New York: Lexington Books (1994), p. 19.

“Conflict essentially stops kids in their tracks—they are less free to go about the business of being a kid, meeting the developmental tasks that are essential to forming a healthy self.” Mary Ellen Hannibal, *Good Parenting Through Your Divorce*. New York: Marlow and Company (2002), p. 58.

“Children who are exposed to more intense conflict between parents are more likely to suffer harm resulting from their parents’ divorce. The lower the level of conflict between parents, the more likely those children will emerge emotionally whole.” Andrew I. Schepard, *Children, Courts, and Custody: Interdisciplinary Models for Divorcing Families*. New York: Cambridge University Press (2004), p. 31.

“The thing that stresses children most, sometimes for many years, is lingering conflict between their parents.” Constance Ahrons, *We’re Still Family: What Grown Children Have to Say about Their Parents’ Divorce*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers (2004), p. 80.

“Our data show that the long-term consequences of interparental discord for children are pervasive and consistently detrimental . . . [and] have a broad negative impact on virtually every dimension of offspring well-being.” Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1997), p. 219.

“One of the most important aspects of the family environment for children whose parents are divorcing is the level of parental fighting. In fact, parental fighting is actually a better forecaster of children’s function after the divorce than the changes in the parents’ marital status . . . and the children’s subsequent separation from a parent.” E. Mark Cummings and Patrick Davies, *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution*. New York: The Guilford Press (1994), p. 9.

“Some parents desperately hold onto the belief that children are not affected by the parents’ conflicts. Sadly, this just isn’t true. Unhappy homes make unhappy children, and every divorce will take its toll unless some corrective steps are taken.” Archibald D. Hart, *Children and Divorce: What to Expect—How to Help*. Dallas: Word Publishing (1982, 1989), p. 121.