

Your Village: Parenting Beyond Discipline

#201: *Special Edition #2 Co-Parenting Through Divorce - Dealing with Parental Guilt Transcript

Erin: Welcome to the Your Village podcast, Parenting Beyond Discipline. Your Village is the most comprehensive site for evidence-based parenting classes available on-demand at YourVillageOnline.com. Our classes give parents the foundation, steps and tools for creating strong, healthy relationships with their children, resulting in responsible, cooperative, happy and successful children and families! My goal is to help parents support their children in finding and reaching their own unique potential. The podcast is a place to learn about all things parenting and get your questions answered! I'm Your Village founder and your host, Erin Royer.

Hello everyone. I always hesitate to say "welcome" to the divorce episodes. It rarely a journey anyone wants to take, one wrought with a lot of tough emotions. But if this is a journey you are on, I do say welcome because I hope this is a place you feel supported and some connection with some of the exact same things you are experiencing and that it is healing for you.

When I shared about our divorce with you, my audience, I had already done most of the hard work. I was luckily able to work through a lot of those tough emotions over a year to a year and half and had been well settled into my new vision of myself on my new path long before I shared about our decision, which made it much easier to talk about. The feelings were no longer raw or swirling around in my head. While, as of the recording of this podcast we are still living in the same household, I can see my steps forward in the coming months and years. This decision to stay in the same house has a lot to do with what I will be discussing today.

When I was going thorough the many emotions, one of my big ones was parental guilt. I had so much guilt to work through. It came and went. I would accept it and work on it and thought I had it all processed and then it would come up again, just pop up out of nowhere. I had guilt towards my spouse too, the I made a promise I'm backing out of. But my parental guilt was about feeling selfish. Research has often been brutal about the effects of divorce on kids. This is before I really dug into the research myself. But those cultural and societal pressures to "stay together for the kids" are no small thing. they loom over you like a dark cloud. Every time I seriously considered divorce, immediately I would think, "why is my happiness more important than theirs?" "Aren't I just being selfish?" Then I realize they deserve a mom who is happy and what effect am I having on them if I stay? Even if it doesn't show, as someone who studied and

practiced psychology, I knew on some subliminal level they were picking up on it. I knew, regardless of the choice I made I was leaving them with their own legacy to untangle as adults, in their own adult relationships. What legacy did I want to leave? I was in so much pain, feeling stuck, stifled, smothered and I knew I didn't want them to experience that. I hoped that by my facing my pain and doing what I needed to find happiness that I would save them from that fate.

So I dug into some research and here's what I learned. All those studies, especially those from the 80s and 90s were very poorly designed at best but biased studies at worst. Scientists aren't supposed to be biased but sometimes they can be. It almost seemed as if they wanted to prove that staying in a marriage was by far the better option than divorce. I'll talk a little bit about the poor design of one of these studies in a moment. They showed negative effect after negative effect, from mental health affects on children and into their adulthood like depression, anxiety, behavioral issues and more, to high school dropout rates, to college graduation rates to the divorce rates in their own future marriages. But what was missing from these studies was effects on children who's parents stayed unhappily married, effects on children who's parents maintained a low-conflict relationship and remained connected and supportive of their children.

The good news is that newer research does absolutely support this. It shows that of course, divorce affects most children in the short run, just like it does us adults. But research also suggests that kids recover rapidly after the initial shock and that Most children from divorced families also do equally as well in the long term. In a quantitative review of the literature in 2001, Paul R. Amato, a sociologist, then at Pennsylvania State University, examined these possible effects on children several years after a divorce. The studies compared children of married parents with those who experienced divorce at different ages. The researchers then followed these kids through childhood and into adolescence, assessing their academic achievement, emotional and behavior problems, delinquency, self-concept and social relationships. On average, the studies found only very small differences on all these measures between children of divorced parents and those from intact families.

What research has found that actually affects children are 4 key factors: high conflict during and after divorce, a loss of socio-economic status that often follows divorce, parental mental health and quality of parenting which can decline for many reasons, including one or both parents working more to make up the financial strain, as well as parental mental health. So let's dig into each of these, starting with parental conflict.

What research found is that the biggest factor affecting children's mental health is the amount of conflict between the parents either during the divorce process, after or both, which makes sense. If every time a child switches from one parents home to another, there is conflict, animosity or even just coldness or tension, they experience it. In research studies where this was not taken into account, it began to appear that seeing the other parent (usually dad since moms tend to get primary custody when these studies were done, but even still today) the research showed seeing the other parent was more often was a detriment. but it was because of the tension or conflict not because the non-custodial parent (usually dad) wasn't a positive influence. The early research completely missed it and therefore drew an outright incorrect and harmful conclusion.

What kids need is two mature, supportive parents. The better we can work together through and after the divorce process, the better it will be for our children. This is why I start the co-parenting through divorce series with this process of doing the hard work. Working through our feelings, releasing blame, shame, anger, resentment and more for ourselves to our ex or soon-to-be ex for the healthiest path forward apart but together. Separate but still "a family"

This was my number one goal, that we be able to be as committed to the kids and their health and wellbeing on all levels, mental, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual as much as possible. While we might be moving apart to become our best selves separately, the kids would remain the central focus throughout the process and beyond. We may have to put our personal goals or desires on hold from time to time in order to do this. Luckily I have a parenting partner who could step up to this challenge and I know not everyone has this. If you do, you are very lucky too. If you do not, just know that doing your best work for yourself and them will still be a huge benefit.

In the last special episode I talked about the ways to begin this process of setting this solid emotional foundation for a smoother separation process. So if you haven't listened to that, and you are still in the beginning stages or if you aren't in the beginning stages but know you may have some holes in your foundation, you'll want to go back and listen to that. Of course the class co-parenting through divorce part I picks up where the podcast leaves off with continuing to do the work and finding all the right support, tools and ideas for working through all the different tough emotions that continually come up.

I remember when my ex and I were first talking about our separation, when we had first decided this was the best way forward for us. I told him I didn't want a rigid custody schedule. I wanted him to see the kids whenever he wanted and I would never say no

so long as it was logistically feasible, no matter who's "night" or "weekend" it is. I said I'd like the same courtesy. We agreed on this early.

My ex has a very close friend since early childhood who's parents got divorced, so this was in the early 70s. They did an incredible job of managing their relationships and I'm sure it wasn't always easy. His mom never remarried. His dad did and they are still together. Even now with their grandkids, every holiday, every birthday, every sporting event, all 3 grandparents are always there to support their grandkids. They did the same for their two kids when they were young. they put whatever differences they had aside and really rallied for the children. This was relatively unheard of in the 70s and 80s. So they are a role model for me, for what a divorced and blended family can look like.

Next I'm going to talk about the other 3 key areas that affect children after a word from our sponsor.

Now that we're back after the break, I'm going to talk about the other key areas that can effect kids mental health due to divorce.

The second area is a loss of socio-economic status that can often happen after a divorce. When going from running one household to two, it's a rare family and situation that isn't negatively affected financially. In co-parenting part II I talk about all the ways to minimize this affect for everyone as it only adds to the stress of the situation. Unfortunately I've also known personally and about couples who stayed because they could not afford to get divorced. No one is happy in that situation. In the class I first discuss several options that do not require the traditional two-divorce attorney route, complete with litigation. If you can avoid that, do so at all costs. It only eats away at the hard earned money that should be for the family. It can drag the process out indefinitely. I've heard of horror stories where attorney's will stir up the controversy and prey on emotions just to keep the case going. I know in some cases, it's the only way but it should be a very last resort. There are 4 other options to consider and give a go first. We handled our entire divorce with no lawyers and not even a mediator. It was important to us to preserve our wealth, mental health and our connection for our family. so our entire process including court filing fees was less than \$1500.

As I shared in the first episode, I made a lot of compromises that I didn't legally need to. The point is, I knew my legal rights. I knew what I was entitled to. But we were living comfortably on what we were making together, most of it from my ex husband's salary. I had only been able to contribute a small amount each month at that as my business had just started making enough to pay myself a small commission each month. But I

wasn't about to go trying to split that down the middle for two households. I couldn't make the kids move from their home and into two smaller homes. I wasn't going to affect their extra curricular activities or anything else about their lifestyle either if I didn't have to. I believed in myself, what my business had to offer and in my ability to make it into something that could support a second household on the same level as their current home.

With that said, as of today, I'm still not in a position to be able to buy a property that is the right fit for our family. With 3 kids, one of them 11 and soon going into puberty, I just feel like everyone having their own rooms is really important. So that means a 4 bedroom home in Southern California. Could I get something? Sure! A 3 to 4 bedroom townhouse 1/2 the square footage of our current home with a patio for a backyard. But their dad and I still get along just fine. We tag team meals and online learning. I have my own room and I'm saving up and continuing to build my income. So it just makes sense to keep doing what we're doing and soon enough, I'll be buying a home of my own. The kids get to see us working together as friends and they are learning that ending a romantic relationship doesn't mean you still can't appreciate, care for or even still love someone. So, as much as I'd love to at least be in a position to be planning a move, there are a lot of positives that are coming from this. I can just be patient. Life is comfortable. I'm not worried about finances and covering a big mortgage right now. I have a lot less stress, which makes it so much easier to focus on work!

So if you are concerned about your finances in divorce and how it will affect your children, if you can manage to maintain or maybe even fix the friendship piece when the stress of trying to fix the romantic connection is relieved, and support each other to be able to set and reach financial and/or career goals as you work to separate, it's a really nice place to be able to work from. I know a couple in the middle of divorce but the wife is going back to school for nursing. They have some time before she graduates but they are doing the best they can repair and maintain a friendship so that their children can be financially well-supported in both homes.

There are a lot of options for working together to make it the best transition for everyone. It does require a lot patience with self, patience with the other, friendship, connection and understanding. But when done well, it does help in greatly releasing that tension of feeling so stuck. I'm so grateful to my parenting partner for embodying all of those qualities, patience, friendship and understanding. But I know he's also grateful to me for the same. His biggest fear was being bled dry, giving up the house, 1/2 his salary or more and paying the mortgage while he lived in a 1 bedroom apartment.

The other two areas that can affect kids, as a recap, the first is conflict between divorcing parents, the second is loss of socio-economic status, third and fourth are parental mental health and quality of parenting. These pieces can and often do, all play off of each other. So doing the foundational work from the first special podcast episode on divorce, as well as the class is exactly what will eliminate the mental-emotional health struggles to the degree possible. Financial stress can also affect mental health. So working on financial goals, whether on your own or with your parenting partner, will also greatly reduce mental health issues. Lastly financial issues and mental health are what can contribute to loss of parenting quality, working long hours, stress, conflict with the other parent, depression, fear, anxiety are going to affect our quality of parenting.

The bottom line here is, that despite what we've been lead to believe about the effects of divorce on our children, if you are dealing with any guilt or worry or concern over that, the research is showing that done well, keeping conflict to a minimum, prioritizing our own mental health and planning for our two-home financial future can allow our children to have just as much opportunity for a bright and happy future as their in-tact family peers.

If you have a parenting question you'd like answered, send an email to Podcast@YourVillageOnline.com.

Thanks for listening and see you next week!