



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
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Divorce is high on the list of life-changing traumas for both parents and children, but kids often take it harder than parents. When I practiced family law full-time, I endeavored to achieve the best results possible for my clients' children, as well as for the clients themselves. But figuring out what is "best" can be daunting.

It is a heart-wrenching topic. There are dramatically differing schools of thought on divorce's effects on children and on custody "rights" and "parenting plans," but I observe a common thread of deep and palpable concern for the welfare of children. The most hard-line Father's Rights advocates, the mother-as-primary-caregiver proponents, those who seek recognition for third-party caregivers like same-sex partners and grandparents, and all concerned parties seem to agree that we should do what is "best" for the children.

Indeed, the "best interests of the child" legal standard for custody cases enjoys almost universal acceptance across different state law systems, including Pennsylvania's. But although it is tempting to come full circle back to that simple "best interests" mantra when considering what to do for children of divorce, it is in its simplicity that we must recognize some danger. For "best interests" is vague enough to be interpreted in many different ways. In fact, the realm of scholarly legal writers, where I now hang my hat in academia, is teeming with criticism for the vagueness of the "best interests" standard. That's fine—they're probably right. But "best interests" is still the law. And while lawyers, judges and scholars grapple with the legal standard, how do we as concerned parents/aunts/uncles/neighbors/citizens protect the actual interests of children of divorce in our own lives? In my opinion, parents themselves know "best" what is "best" for their children. The piece that separating parents sometimes overlook is that they must continue to co-parent—to work from the same playbook, if you will, even after their separation. Some of my favorite habits of successful parents—separated or not:

- Meet your children where they are. Watch them do the things they like to do—or join in, if they'll let you. If your presence embarrasses them, invent ways to be nearby.
- Listen. If you're around, your child will eventually talk. Time together—it's that simple. If they talk negatively, be patient. Don't tolerate disrespect, but leave room for venting and differing perspectives.
- Ask for help. Perplexed about exactly what is in a child's "best interests"? Get input from their teacher, their counselor, their doctor, their coach.

- Let go of your pride when it comes to your child's other parent/family. You need each other, and your children desperately need to see you getting along. Fake it if you must. And never, ever, speak negatively of them to the child.
- If you must use the legal system, keep your child out of it if possible. Never discuss it with them. Seek positive outcomes; nobody "wins" in Family Court.

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