



Dr. Joan Kelly's

Top Ten Ways To Protect Your Kids from the Fallout of a High Conflict Break-up

Joan B. Kelly, Ph.D. is a ground breaking clinical psychologist and researcher who began studying the impact of divorce on children in 1968. Joan is an author, therapist, mediator, and Parenting Coordinator with *four* decades of experience working with high conflict parents who are separating and divorcing. She has more than 85 publications, including *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce* (Basic Books, 1980). She lives in Corte Madera, California. She shares her expertise in *How to Divorce & Not Wreck the Kids*.

1. Talk to your children about your separation.

Studies show that *only 5 percent of parents* actually sit down, explain to their children when a marriage is breaking up, and encourage them to ask questions. Nearly one quarter of parents say nothing, leaving their children in total confusion. Talk to your kids. Tell them, in very simple terms, what it all means to them and their lives. When parents do not explain what's happening to their children, the kids feel anxious, upset and lonely and find it much harder to cope with the separation.

2. Be discreet.

Recognize that your children love you both, and think of how to reorganize things in a way that respects their relationship with *both* parents. Don't leave adversarial papers, filings and affidavits out on your kitchen counter for children to read. Don't talk to your best friend, your mother, your lawyer on the phone about legal matters or your ex when the kids are in the next room. They may hear you. Sometimes kids creep up to the door to listen. Even though they're disturbed by conflict and meanness between their parents, kids are inevitably curious - and ill-equipped to understand these adult matters.

3. Act like grown-ups. Keep your conflict away from the kids.

Even parents with high levels of anger can "encapsulate" their conflict, creating a protective buffer for the children by saving arguments or fights for a mediator's office – or a scheduled meeting at a coffee shop. It may seem obvious but so many separating parents continue to fall down on this front. When parents put children in the middle of their conflict and use them as messengers, sounding boards or spies, their children often become depressed and angry and may develop behavioral problems.

4. Dad, stay in the picture.

Long-term studies show that the more involved fathers are after separation and divorce, the better. Develop a child-centered parenting plan that allows a continuing and meaningful relationship with both parents. Where a good father-child relationship exists, kids grow into adolescence and young adulthood as *well adjusted* as married family children. High levels of appropriate father involvement are linked to better academic functioning in kids as well as better adjustment overall. That's true at every age level and particularly in adolescents. Fathers, be more than a "fun" dad. Help with homework and projects, use appropriate discipline, and be emotionally available to talk about problems.



5. Mom, deal with anger appropriately.

In their anger and pain, mothers may actively try to keep Dad out of the children's lives - even when they are good fathers whom the children love. When you're hurting, it's easy to think you never want to see the ex again, and to convince yourself that's also best for the kids. But children's needs during separation are very different from their parents. Research reports children consistently saying, "Tell my dad I want to see him more. I want to see him for longer periods of time. Tell my mom to *let* me see my dad."

6. Be a good parent.

You can be forgiven for momentarily "losing it" in anger or grief, but not for long. Going through a separation is not a vacation from parenting -providing appropriate discipline, monitoring your children, maintaining your expectations about school, being emotionally available. Competent parenting has emerged as *one of the most important protective factors* in terms of children's positive adjustment to separation.

7. Manage your own mental health.

If feelings of depression, anxiety, or anger continue to overwhelm you, seek help. Even a few sessions of therapy can be enormously helpful. Remember, your own mental health affects your children.

8. Keep the people your children care about in their lives.

Encourage your children to stay connected to your ex's family and important friends. If possible, use the same babysitters or child care. This stable network strengthens a child's feeling that they are not alone in this world, but have a deep and powerful support system – an important factor in becoming a psychologically healthy adult.

9. Be thoughtful about your future love life.

Ask yourself: must your children meet everyone you date? Take time, a lot of time, before you remarry or cohabit again. Young children in particular form attachments to your potential life partners and, if new relationships break up, loss after loss may lead to depression and lack of trust in children. And don't expect your older kids to instantly love someone you've chosen – this person will have to earn their respect and affection.

10. Pay your child support.

Even if you're angry or access to your children is withheld, pay child support regularly. Children whose parents separate or divorce face much more economic instability than their married counterparts, even when support is paid. Don't make the situation worse. In this as in all things, let your message to the kids be that you care so much about them that you will keep them separate, and safe, from any conflict. They will appreciate it as they get older.



How to Divorce & Not Wreck the Kids

Biographies

Writer/Director/Producer: Maureen Palmer has spent the last eight years in the world of independent documentaries and factual entertainment, after two decades in news and current affairs at CBC Radio and Television. As an independent filmmaker she has produced several documentaries alongside **How to Divorce & Not Wreck the Kids** producer Helen Slinger for their Vancouver-based company, **Bountiful Films** including - **Leaving Bountiful, Polygamy's Lost Boys** and **the Bully's Mark**. Maureen has worked as a story editor, story producer, and series producer for a wide variety of North American broadcasters, including -- **Making It Big** for the Life Network, **Glutton For Punishment** for the Food Network and **The Week the Women Went** for CBC. Her work has won several awards, from Bronze and Silver at the *New York Festivals*, a *Jack Webster Award*, the *B'nai B'rith League of Human Rights Award* for Best Documentary, and the *Canadian Association of Journalists Award* for Best Documentary.

Maureen Palmer & Divorce: Raised in Sudbury, Maureen has lived in Toronto, Edmonton and now Vancouver. She's has been divorced for more than a decade. For most of that decade, Maureen flew every 2nd week or so from Vancouver to Edmonton to spend a long weekend in the basement of her old matrimonial home, where she could do the "mom" thing for her two daughters. Ex-husband, journalist Graham Thomson, made many jokes about having the "ex-wife in the basement," but the reality was: this unorthodox relationship allowed their children to grow up with both parents in their lives as much as possible. Maureen admits to stumbling, making mistakes and acting like an adolescent at times, but her daughters Erin, 27, and Heather, 22, think mistakes were few and far between. They actually suggested this documentary, when they thanked her and their father for allowing them to grow up in a home free of conflict.

Writer/Producer: Helen Slinger is a master storyteller whose work spans three decades. Recent documentary writer/director credits include **the Bully's Mark, Embracing Bob's Killer**, and **Leaving Bountiful**. Helen's written a legion of documentaries for other directors, and is a highly-respected story editor and script doctor. Various projects have won *Gemini* nominations, Finalist *New York Festivals*, Platinum Award *Worldfest Houston*, Jury Award *Yorkton Short Film & Video Festival*, selection *Montreal World Film Festival*, selection *Vancouver International Film Festival*, selection *Girlfest Hawaii*, a *Gracie Allen* (Foundation of American Women In Radio & TV), *RTNDA* (Radio & Television News Directors) awards, and several *Columbus International Film & Television Awards* including the *Edgar Dale Award* for excellence in non-fiction screenwriting.



Helen Slinger & Divorce: Raised in Saskatoon, Helen Slinger has lived in Toronto, Victoria BC and now North Vancouver. She's been happily divorced for more than 20 years and is the mother of one bio-daughter from that marriage. Since the divorce, Helen and her daughter's dad have celebrated together every Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthday (hers, his, their daughter's and his son's from an earlier marriage). Knowing her not to be a saint, Helen's friends initially thought she was nuts. At the time, this was not a fashionable way to divorce....and, to be clear, the divorce was not all lovey-dovey amicable. So this small collaborative divorce was an active choice to go against the tide. Today Helen's daughter and step-son express gratitude for the family that remained after the marriage ended and Helen feels very proud of herself and of her daughter's dad. Tucked in with the old greetings cards around the house is a Mother's Day card from her then 14-year-old daughter in which she lists the things she appreciates about Mom. High up on the list: "the way you get along with my dad".

Producer: Sue Ridout chose the life of an independent producer after twenty award-winning years in network news and current affairs at both CTV and CBC Television. During her tenure as the Executive Producer of News & Current Affairs for CBC Television in Vancouver, her team won more than 100 awards. Now Sue produces and directs documentaries for broadcasters including CBC, CTV, History Channel and Knowledge Network. She has produced two other documentaries for CBC's Doc Zone series: ***Embracing Bob's Killer***, about a woman who forgives the man who killed her husband; and ***Desperately Seeking Doctors***, about the lack of family physicians in Canada. Sue uses her considerable management skills to coordinate business affairs on documentaries for other companies, like **Bountiful Films**.