



New television special explores what's best for children when couples split

When “I do” turns into “We just can’t,” what happens to the kids?

Each year, millions of American couples divorce, leaving their children unintentionally caught in the middle. For kids there are many difficult questions, but few easy answers. Amidst visitation arrangements, counseling, and—in some cases—court dates, children of divorce struggle to maintain a sense of normalcy while the family they once knew is falling apart around them.

In *Kids & Divorce: For Better or Worse*, airing Thursday, September 14, at 10p.m. on PBS (check local listings), host Dave Iverson explores the highly charged issue of divorce and asks what parents and the legal system can do to minimize the negative impact on children. Through a mix of in-studio discussion and documentary reports, this one-hour television special takes a closer look at innovative approaches to divorce education, debates whether or not current custody laws should be changed, and offers sound advice from nationally-recognized experts who demonstrate how families can communicate, co-parent, and heal.

“While the aftermath of a failed marriage generates strong emotions for the parents, what does divorce really mean for children?” asks host Iverson. “A recent long-term study at the University of Virginia found that while the majority of children do well following a divorce, about one quarter experience significant emotional or behavioral problems. That’s about double the rate for kids whose parents don’t divorce. What can we do to improve these odds?”

In *Kids & Divorce: For Better or Worse*, an esteemed panel of experts from the fields of family counseling, law, and psychology debates the most critical question facing divorcing parents: What’s best for kids? These experts include: Dr. Peter Jaffe, academic director for the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario; Dr. Isolina Ricci, author of *Mom’s House, Dad’s House: The complete Guide for Parents Who Are Separated, Divorced or Remarried*; Ernest Sanchez, senior mediator for the Los Angeles Superior Court; Andrew Schepard, director of the Center for Children, Families, and the Law at Hofstra University; Marjorie Slabach, family court commissioner in San Francisco, California; and Dr. Richard Warshak, psychologist and author of *Divorce Poison*.

While each member of the panel brings a unique background and perspective to the provocative conversation, there's one main point on which they all can agree: The single best thing parents can do for their children is to reduce the amount of conflict expressed in front of them, any way possible.

"It takes a lot of effort to pull back from your feelings, because you want to help your child," says Dr. Ricci. "One of the techniques or approaches that has been used for many years is called thinking about the other parent as a business associate. You think about being not only respectful and courteous, but using all the common courtesies that you would in a business relationship."

The fact is people are not always at their best when dealing with divorce. Sometimes it takes training to learn how to relate to one another again. In this television special, viewers will visit Kids' Turn, a divorce education program in San Francisco, California, where both parents and children learn how to deal with the emotional upheaval in their lives. Here, counseling, support groups—and even drawing pictures—can be practical tools for dealing with anger and conflicted emotions.

"Parents are sort of overwhelmed with all the changes that are going on in a divorce or separation and it's difficult to concentrate on parenting," says Chandler Hoffman, a counselor with Kids' Turn. "We give [parents] a lot of tools to reduce the conflict."

But for some couples it's not so simple. When the conflict is so intense it's affecting the children, or when there are allegations of abuse or violence, the court system needs to intervene. While most cases don't actually go to trial, the legal system still plays a crucial role in the toughest divorce cases. And here, the adversarial process of litigation can be very damaging, not only to the co-parental relationship, but also to the parent-child relationships because the system forces everyone to think in black and white terms. "There's a lot of psychological damage that can be done through allegations, affidavits, declarations, for example," says psychologist Dr. Joan Kelly. "So the black and white polarized thinking is not good."

In one of the documentary reports featured in *Kids & Divorce: For Better or Worse*, producers travel to Westport, Connecticut, where a group of attorneys, family therapists and financial planners are trying an interdisciplinary process that allows for shades of grey. Called collaborative divorce, this innovative approach pushes participants to settle their differences without going to court. Professor Andrew Schepard, director of the Center for Children,

Families, and the Law at Hofstra University, believes this may be the most important innovation yet.

“Our fundamental task for the twenty-first century is to define what the nature of the divorce system is and when going to court is appropriate and when it’s not,” Schepard explains. “It’s also to work with other disciplines to do what’s best for families and children.”

So who should decide what’s best for the children? Mom? Dad? A Judge?

One of the most contentious issues in divorce cases is often who will be awarded custody and where the children will live following the divorce. Traditionally, mothers have been more likely than fathers to wind up with the primary parenting role. Sometimes that’s by mutual agreement, sometimes by court ruling. While parents pledge to want what’s best for the children, the division of parent time can’t be figured out with a calculator. “Kids don’t think about how many hours they spend with each parent,” says psychologist Dr. Marsha Pruett. They need to feel that they can continue to go to soccer, to be at ballet, to see the kid down the block, and not to worry about whether they have to because it’s dad’s day or mom’s day, and which town they do it in.”

In recent years, joint physical custody or shared parenting has become more common. In some states, it’s the legal norm. But the topic of shared parenting is one of fierce debate across the country. In the final segment of the broadcast, Iverson explores with the expert panel when joint physical custody makes sense for a family and whether legally presumed joint custody should be the starting point in divorce. The result is the most intense debate in the program.

“I think you get into a problem if you assume that it’s a one-size-fits-all solution,” says Psychologist Dr. Richard Warshak, author of *Divorce Poison*. “Shared custody doesn’t have to mean fifty-fifty distribution of time in every family. There are many ways to distribute the time. But it does mean that both parents are going to be fully involved in the child’s life.”

While the panelists agree it’s a good idea to encourage parents to work toward co-parenting, some dispute that legally presumed joint custody is the answer. “When you presume joint custody, it creates an atmosphere....So even people with legitimate concerns about their personal safety or the safety of their children are coerced into coming to a settlement or a solution that is not in anyone’s best interest,” says Dr. Peter Jaffe, director of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children.

While the experts in child psychology and family law will continue to debate what’s best for children of divorce, American families must cope with the daily challenge of putting their

lives back together and moving on as usual when, in fact, nothing is ever the same. Perhaps a child interviewed for the program summarizes it best: "Once the parent makes that choice," he says, "it's gonna be permanent for a lifetime."

Kids & Divorce: For Better or Worse is a production of Twin Cities Public Television. The producer, writer, and host is Dave Iverson. The field producers are Michael Schwarz and Frederica Freyberg. The director is Joe Brandmeier. The executive producer is Gerry Richman.

Funding for *Kids & Divorce: For Better or Worse* is provided by Public Television Viewers and PBS. Closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers. For home video call 1-800-PLAYPBS.

#

Press contact:

Erin Martin Kane
Publicist

(508) 309-3530
erin@emkpr.com