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## MENTAL HEALTH

# Treat Your Children Right Post-Divorce

By ANTHONY CONTI | GUEST COLUMNIST

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Every once in a while I get the urge to mouth off (again).

It's about you parents — you parents that, for whatever reason, have decided not to stay together, but rather to seek the greener pastures of life. That's only part of it. The other part, sadly, is how you treat your children in the process.

It often begins with the marriage going bad and the fighting continues. Major violation No. 1 — it's never about a fight. As this writer insists, fighting is the least productive way to attempt to settle anything. Both sides lose. Then we have a bitter separation and an ultimate divorce. The kids never get to vote, and often they don't have any input. "You'll understand when you get older."

Actually, the kids are probably the only ones who do understand. Mom and Dan can't figure out how to get along and they are going mess up everything. Right on kids. You got it; that seems to sum it up in a nutshell.

Now the fight continues. Let's see what we can make as issues. Well, the kids themselves, for one thing. OK, let's each grab an arm and pull like crazy — sometimes whether we really want them or not. See, by this time in the process, we are ready to fight over anything.

We fight about how much time each parent should get, what days, what holidays, what time of the day, and what minute the transfer needs to be made. The process in this part of the game is for each parent to try to convince the kids that the other parent is either evil or really doesn't want them anyway — after all, it was all their fault that this happened, wasn't it?

Now let's see, what else can we fight about? There are just so many things I hardly know what to choose next. How about child support? The rules here are the parent with the most money has to make it seem like he or she has the least, and it's going to bust the bank if they have to toss in a dime more. God forbid the child would need a pair of cleats for the baseball team or an outfit for the spring performance — forget about braces.

The parent with the least amount of money has to do the best to appear on the verge of being homeless, and should try to extract every last bit of everything from the ex-spouse, and of course reminding the children that our hardship and sacrifice are the fault of the other, uncaring parent.

We're having so much fun already, it hardly seems necessary to throw more gas on our fire, but, oh well, why not? Let's add one or two "friends" to the drama. All of a sudden that gal that was "just a friend" takes on a little more significance when she and the ex-husband begin living with each other or ex-wife begins having sleepovers again — and not with little girls. Better step back because the sparks really fly now.

With all this going on, something seems to get lost in the struggle — the clear, basic fact that although the Marital Contract has now been broken and is null and void, the Parenting Contract is NOT, and, unlike the first, can only be dissolved by "death do us part."



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The simple rules for starters. First, drop the gloves, or in this case STOP the fighting. (I said simple, not easy.) No one gains grounds by this kind of battle. Second — provide what's needed, not what's mandated by law. The legal requirement, for example, might be that the child or children have a place of residence. What often happens is they get bounced from one residence to the other. Realizing that what their children needed was stability and consistency, one divorced couple chose to alternate their residence, leaving the children permanently in their original home. Third — support the other parent. This is a toughy. You probably couldn't do it before the divorce — how could you do it after? This takes considerable empathy, realizing that the parent with primary residence more than likely feels overwhelmed and the other parent feels excluded and discarded. Both need support.

Well, I certainly feel better having gotten some of this off my chest. Didn't mean to dump it on you — unless the big clown shoe fits. Please, let's take care of our children as well as we possibly can.

Even if there can't be a husband and wife, there still needs to be Mom and Dad.

[ Anthony Conti is a licensed mental health counselor in Lakeland. ]

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