

What is Divorce Abuse?

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As a parent you surely pride yourself in protecting your children from harm. However in the midst of a conflicted divorce or separation, when emotions and tensions are at a peak, there are times where emotionally abusive behavior may slip in and cause you to harm your child with “divorce abuse”.

Divorce Abuse is a specific type of emotional abuse committed by parents specifically during and after their divorce. Emotional abuse is defined as “acts or omissions that have caused, or could cause, serious behavioral, cognitive and emotional disorders.” Although not as overt as physical abuse, emotional abuse is no less dangerous for children. While it can cause severe emotional pain and hinder a child’s emotional and social development, many parents don’t even know they’re committing it. The following behaviors are examples of how you may unknowingly inflict divorce abuse on your child:

- Putting your child in the middle of your conflict
- Making negative comments about the other parent
- Having arguments with the other parent when your child can overhear
- Using your child to manipulate the other parent
- Involving the police when there is no physical threat
- Video or audio taping your child for court purposes
- Involving your child in the legal aspects of your divorce
- Telling your child “the truth” in an attempt to alien them with your cause.
- Leaning on your child for emotional support
- Talking openly about putting the other parent in jail or taking them back to court
- Playing victim
- Trying to make your child miss you while they are with the other parent.
- Continuously blaming the other parent for the divorce or its results
- Refusing to even mention the other parent’s name or acknowledge they exist
- Using your child to communicate messages with the other parent
- Neglecting your child’s physical or emotional needs because you are over focused on the legal battle.

- Overindulging your child or avoiding discipline in order to become the “preferred” parent
- Interrupting or blocking your child’s time with their other parent
- Withholding your child’s possessions to control or punish the other parent
- Neglecting to take your child to their activities just to upset the other parent
- Interrogating your child to get information about the other parent
- Withholding parenting information so that your child misses opportunities to share activities with both parents.

You are likely already committing some of these behaviors without fully understanding the negative impact on your child. A few examples of how children are impacted by divorce abuse include:

- Poor self esteem due to exposure to negative comments about either parent
- Increased anxiety
- Increased anger turned outward as aggression
- Increased anger turned inward causing depression or withdrawal
- Loyalty binds
- Parentified children who feel responsible for their parent’s happiness
- Physical symptoms of stress such as headaches, stomachs
- Relationship difficulties
- In severe cases, estrangement from a parent, drug and alcohol use and early sexual acting out

What can you do to eliminate the emotional abuse of your children during a divorce? First, stop and reflect upon your past behaviors and resist justifying your actions. Divorce abuse awareness is certainly the first step, but real change requires a sincere commitment to new behaviors. Apologize to your child for your poor choices and commit to making some immediate changes. Some alternative behaviors include:

- Focusing on disengaging emotionally from your former spouse
- Learning to separate your personal feelings from your child’s feeling
- Learning to compartmentalize your negative emotions from your actions.
- Managing your anger and impulse control around the children

- Shielding your child from conflict, negative comments, guilt and divorce information your top priority.
- Focusing on the positive no matter how angry and hurt you may be feeling.
- Providing your child adequate adjustment time by avoiding introductions to a significant other for at least a year.
- Speaking in positive ways about the other parent with your child.
- Helping your child purchase or make a birthday card for the other parent.
- Stop badmouthing your co-parent altogether. Then speak with neighbors and family to get their commitment to avoid divorce abuse.
- Modeling mature behaviors for your child.
- Making sacrifices that benefit your child.
- Posting the Divorce Rules in your home found at www.cooperativeparenting.com

Other suggestions that may help you to avoid divorce abuse would include:

Locate a Cooperative Parenting & Divorce eight week co-parenting class to learn to work with your co-parent more effectively. If you are struggling emotionally find a therapist to work with and/or join a recovery group for emotional support. Learn the five steps to avoid Divorce Abuse in *Crossroads of Parenting & Divorce*. No matter what the final custody arrangement find a way to work with the other parent for the sake of your child.

In situations in which you are at war with the other parent or in a high conflict case it is imperative that you recognize the need for a parent coordinator to assist your family. Without this help both parents may commit divorce abuse and wreak havoc on your child's emotional development. With the help of a parenting coordinator to monitor parental behaviors you and your co-parent can make the necessary changes to help your child have a healthy childhood.

Now, you may already be dealing with overwhelming negative emotions associated with your process of divorce. Recognizing divorce abuse may

just add to your guilt. However, implementing these new behaviors will help you discover that you have the power to make positive changes that will benefit your child and your long term relationship with your child's other parent. For more information visit:

- www.cooperativeparenting.com
- www.parentingcoordinationcentral.com

Boyan & Termini, *Cooperative Parenting & Divorce; A Parent Guide to Effective Co-Parenting*, Active Parenting Publishers 1997

Boyan & Termini, *Crossroads of Parenting & Divorce: 5 Steps to Avoid Divorce Abuse*, Active Parenting Publishers 2009

Boyan & Termini, *Psychotherapist as Parent Coordinator in High Conflict Divorce: Strategies and Techniques*, Taylor Publishing 2004

About the Authors

Susan Boyan and Ann Marie Termini are the founders of Cooperative Parenting Institute which provides divorce related services and products. The authors have written and presented extensively on parenting and divorce issues. They have co-authored several books and programs including *Cooperative Parenting & Divorce; A Parent Guide to Effective Co-Parenting*, *Crossroads of Parenting & Divorce: 5 Steps to Avoid Divorce Abuse*, and *Psychotherapist as Parent Coordinator in High Conflict Divorce: Strategies and Techniques*.