

TEN THINGS CLIENTS SHOULD NEVER SAY TO THEIR CHILDREN

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After ten years of exclusively practicing matrimonial and family law, there are things I know for sure about divorce. The following list of things that should never be said to children are without a doubt things I know for sure.

If you are already divorced, going through a divorce or contemplating a divorce, please read the following list. Commit yourself to living by it. It truly will be the best gift you can give your children.

1. "Mom and Dad are breaking up and it's all your fault."

◆ Be sure that you tell your children (and consistently and repeatedly assure them) that the break-up has absolutely nothing to do with them and both Mom and Dad love them very much and will always love them very much.

2. "Mom and Dad are breaking up and you will never see Mom or Dad again."

◆ Be sure that you tell the children that Dad and Mom will remain in their lives. Explain that things will be different with everyone not living together, but Dad and Mom love them and will always be there for them. Explain to them that they are not getting divorced from their parents.

3(a). "Mom and Dad are breaking up and Mom/Dad took all my money, stole from me, etc."

◆ Do not involve your children in the divorce. Children do not want to know and do not need to know the details. Do not show them or read them the letters from your lawyers; leave them out of it! Allow your children to be children by making the decision not to involve them in adult issues.

3(b). "Your Mom/Dad is a jerk, tramp, spendthrift (and other colorful adjectives I cannot put in print)."

◆ Be sure not to badmouth the other parent. This alienation is very painful to the children.

Children love both parents and when one parent badmouths the other, it hurts the children. Make your children aware that it is perfectly acceptable to show love for the other parent and encourage it. It will come back to you two-fold. Give your children the permission and freedom to love the other parent.

3(c). "Your Mom/Dad left me, cheated on me, destroyed me, hurt me, etc."

◆ Again, this is very destructive to children. Angry feelings conveyed to children can cause them serious problems such as depression.

3(d). "Your Mom's/Dad's brothers, sisters, parents are jerks too and were mean to me when I was married to your Mom/Dad."

◆ Let children love the other parent and their extended family. Do not put pressure on the children to choose sides. Allow and encourage them to love and be loved and they will be happy children.

4. "Mom and Dad are breaking up and Mom/Dad moved out while you were at school."

◆ Be sure to talk to your children in advance of the separation. Both parents together should communicate their decision to divorce to the children. Tell the children Mom and Dad will work together to meet their best interests. This discussion may also take place with a therapist's assistance and guidance.

5. "Give this check or note to Mom/Dad or tell Mom/Dad this or that or call Mom/Dad and tell her/him we are arriving late."

◆ Stop. Do not use the children as messengers. They will feel as though they are being asked to take sides.

6. "Do not even ask me to buy your Mother/Father a Mother's Day/Father's Day card or a Christmas gift."

◆ Do just the opposite; encourage it. Buy a gift for your children to give to the other parent. Recognize these important days and teach your children that these special occasions should be acknowledged.

7. "Do not telephone your Mom/Dad when you are with me. This is my parenting time."

◆ Encourage reasonable, non-intrusive yet frequent telephone contact with the other parent.

8. "I would like you to meet my new girlfriend/boyfriend."

◆ Be a good role model to your children by using good judgment when introducing your children to a new person in your life. The children are still dealing with your divorce, so be patient and put the children's best interest above yours.

9(a). "Whatever you do, do not tell Mom/Dad."

◆ Do not put your children in the middle and certainly do not tell your children secrets that you do not want them to disclose to the other parent. This will only teach your children to be deceptive and dishonest.

9(b). "Tell me what Mom/Dad said about me or did this weekend."

◆ Do not pump your children for information about the other parent.

10(a). "You are acting just like your Mom/Dad."

◆ Do not compare your children to your ex-spouse. Your children are individuals and while you may like or dislike certain qualities about your ex-spouse that you see in your children, such comparisons can be harmful and painful to children because they are aware of your negative feelings toward their other parent.

10(b). "I promise to buy you a house, build a swimming pool, vacation in Hawaii so long as you come and live with me/come and see me."

◆ Do not make promises you cannot keep. Do not manipulate your children.

10(c). "Do you want to live with me? You can come and live with me."

◆ Do not ask children this question. It is too much pressure for children and too great a burden for children to bear.

The above list is certainly not all-inclusive or exhaustive. It is a start, however, to what parents should never say to their children. Commit yourself to this list. Your children will thank you for it.

Jeralyn Lawrence, a member of the Norris McLaughlin & Marcus Matrimonial Law Group, was recently honored as an Outstanding Woman in Somerset County for 2008 by the Somerset County Commission On the Status Of Women. She has been selected as one of the Top 50 Female New Jersey Super Lawyers® 2008 and is included in the Family Law section of Super Lawyers. Jeralyn has been selected by her peers as one of New Jersey's Top 10 matrimonial lawyers under the age of 40 and has been recognized by the New Jersey Law Journal as one of 40 accomplished and promising attorneys in the State of New Jersey under the age of 40. Jeralyn is a frequent speaker at matrimonial law programs and seminars.
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