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## FORENSIC COUNSELING SERVICES

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### **Talking to children.<sup>1</sup>**

In general, most advice you will hear regarding talking to children about disputes in divorce and child custody cases is to not talk about what is going on, and to not criticize the other parent. I've told hundreds of parents that the number one commitment they can make to their children is to spare them unnecessary stress and hardship – there will be plenty of unavoidable conflicts that they encounter growing up. Healthy parents should protect children, not add to their burden.

The question comes up, however, of how to handle when a former partner may not be behaving in a manner you are comfortable with. One early question you have to ask yourself is “who benefits when I share this with the children?” The answer is almost always “me” – because after saying something about the other parent we often feel better. But the relief parents feel in these cases is at the expense of their children's stress levels and their own sense of self worth. Children understand that they are part mom and part dad. When we tell a child one of their parents is “no good” or “irresponsible” or “evil” what we are also saying is that part of the child is too. Is that really what you want to be telling your child? The old adage that “if you can't say something nice don't say anything at all” is well known for a reason.

That said, even the most well-meaning parents sometimes vent their frustration in inappropriate ways. I've found that this is often because they do not understand appropriate ways to express information nor do they have an adequate framework to figure out when to say things and how. This exercise is designed to help you explore and practice these skills without placing your children at risk by “learning as you go.” Let's start with some common misconceptions regarding communication with children:

#### *Telling the truth*

Many parents are focused on “telling the truth” to their children and use this phrase to try and justify inexcusable behaviors. Just as we would not explain the biomechanics of sexual reproduction to a kindergartener by showing them a pornographic video, neither should we overwhelm them with information that is beyond their developmental level in other ways. Telling children that babies come from mommies and daddies who love each other and want a family is not lying to children, nor is it so graphic that they cannot truly absorb it. You'll be asked to think about this each time you're interacting with your children.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted in part from the work of Richard Warshak, author of *Divorce Poison*

*They're a no good so-and-so and the children need to know!*

If your former partner has major shortcomings what makes you think your children are so stupid they won't figure this out on their own? If a parent's shortcomings effect their parenting (they cancel planned activities or parenting time with the children with little or no notice, or they are constantly late to pick the children up, or don't show up at their sports activities) then the children will learn this for themselves. They will form conclusions based on their own experience rather than your interpretation of the other parent. This may be difficult for the children, but it is something that the children can identify on their own. You don't need to belabor the obvious and you don't need to highlight the non-obvious.

If your former partner makes choices (or has made choices in the past) that you don't agree with but these choices do not affect the children, why burden them with such issues? Does it matter that *you* think your former partner: goes out on the town too often, drank alcohol too much in college, got a hidden tattoo, etc.? Can the children do anything about those behaviors? Are children in charge of telling adults what to do, or are you and your former partner in charge of directing the children?

Your assignment:

Think of a situation that you have wanted to discuss with your child and write it down. Include exactly what you think you want to tell the child. Don't edit yourself, write down whatever you're thinking about it from the top of your head. Then take a ten-minute break. Go walk the dog. Have a cup of coffee. Do something pleasant. When you get back re-read what you wrote and then answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons for talking to the child about this issue or sharing this information with them? Write down every possible reason that you can think of. After you have written down all of your reasons, identify if any of these are self-serving or are more about your needs than the children's.
2. Assess whether the child is being harmed by the behavior or situation that you are thinking about. Write down how, specifically, the child is at risk in the situation and how commenting to the child changes that.
3. Think about what specific benefits discussing the situation will have for the child. How will your information help them? Write down your responses.
4. Ask yourself how talking to the child about the situation or revealing information about it to them might be harmful to them. How do you think the help you identified in #3 is balanced against the possible harm that might be caused to the child? Write down these risks and your thoughts on the risk/benefit analysis.
5. Finally, ask yourself if you were happily married to your spouse (even if you never were, let's pretend) and you wanted to protect the child's relationship with them how would you handle this situation? Write down a scenario where you address the identified issue in this manner.