

## DIVORCE GAMES – NOBODY WINS

Divorce is painful, and people who are hurting often act in ways that hurt other people. They may play “divorce games” in which they attempt to use or manipulate someone in order to gain control over their lives, but the games aren’t fun and they’re not good for anyone involved. The games are usually not intentional – they just sort of just happen unless one recognized them and avoids them.

In the beginning of the divorce, people may actually “win” at one or two of the games. Then then fee that they got something out of the mess and have some kind of control over the situation. However, divorce games result in the players feeling guilty, untrustworthy, and depressed, and children are hurt. No one wins in divorce games.

### GAMES PARENTS PLAY

#### I Spy

A parent sometimes asks a child a lot of questions about what is going on in the other parent’s home – questions about whether mom o dad has a boyfriend or girlfriend, if the new boyfriend/girlfriend is spending the night, if mom or dad is drinking or using drugs, if mom/dad asked questions about him or her. Sometimes the questions are to satisfy curiosity, but sometimes they are to hurt the other or to hurt the parent asking the questions. Sometimes the questions are to help a parent feel better about himself or herself – that the other parent is not doing OK without the relationship.

Enlisting the children to play this game complicates and confuses the relationships they have with both parents and is damaging to the emotional wellbeing.

#### Tug of War

Parents sometimes continue their conflicts after the divorce. Each side looks for support for his/her side because then parents can assure themselves that they are “right” and “okay” because the child is on their side.

Children are caught in the middle and feel as though they are being ripped apart. Children usually lose respect for both parents and themselves because children are a part of both parents.

### Messenger

Warring parents can't stand to talk to each other and sometimes don't want to take the chance of making the other parent angry. So they ask children to take little messages to the other parent – “you are two weeks behind in child support and when are you going to pay”; “the house is still half mine and you better make sure the furnace is repaired”; “If I don't get Christmas this year, I won't pay child support.”

Children should not be involved in parent's fights. Children need to love both parents because it makes them feel better about themselves.

### What Would I Do Without You?

When parents divorce, they become overwhelmed and feel less than whole. They feel alone and miss the companionship and help with responsibilities that were part of the marriage. They may count on children to fill the gap and look to the children for emotional support or to be the little mother or man of the house. Children feel used when thrust into the role of being the parent's friend or helpmate. They often must grow up before they are ready and miss out on being children.

### The Money Game

Parents often have a financial crunch when they become single parents. They sometimes let children know how worried they are when bills come due or are overdue. They blame the other parent for their money problems.

This behavior scares the children and makes them feel insecure. They may become preoccupied with thoughts about how they can bring money into the home or they may think that if they aren't there, the parent will be able to cope.

### I'm Starting Over

Sometimes divorce makes parents feel that they are starting over and that they are young again. They may adopt clothing or hairstyles of teenagers. They may stay out late or not come home until morning. Children find it embarrassing and confusing when parents act like "one of the kids."

### I Owe My Kid

Parents know that divorce hurts children, and they feel guilty. Some try to make it up to the children by letting them off the hook with chores and responsibilities or by buying the children wonderful presents sometimes going without things themselves to do it.

Children know when parents are trying to buy their love. It makes them feel uncomfortable. Children need the consistency of still having to do their regularly assigned chores and they need love and attention.

### Over My Dead Body

Sometimes parents play custody and visitation games. They try to get even with the other parent for some hurt that occurred in the marriage or caused the divorce. They try to keep the children from the other parent, or they try to gain custody to break the other parent financially through court battles, to show that they are the better parent, or to intimidate the other parent to gain something else.

Children feel at fault in these games if they weren't around, they wouldn't be a vehicle for the parents to continue to fight. They believe that their feelings don't matter because the parents are so consumed with fighting the war.

## Name Calling

A parent sometimes calls the other parent names or says nasty things about the other parent in the hearing of the children. The parent is hurt or angry and may even believe that the children should know the “truth” about the parent.

Children don't feel good about themselves when part of themselves come from the “no good parent. Children need to learn for themselves the strengths and shortfalls of each parent. They want and need a good relationship with both parents.

## Guided Missile

A parent sometimes may try to use children as a weapon to change the other parent's behavior or to try to get something from the other parent. The parent may refuse to pay child support because he/she believes the other parent is using it for entertainment or new clothes. The parent may refuse visitation because a new girlfriend/boyfriend is in the life of the other parent and that parent is now immoral or not giving enough time to the children.

This behavior is unfair to children. Children should not be used as a pawn for a parent to retaliate against the other parent.

## **GAMES CHILDREN PLAY**

### I'll Be On Your Side if You Give Me What I Want

Children sometimes tell a parent what the other parent has given them or the places the other parent has taken them to try to gain similar advantages from that parent. Children sometimes tell a parent the grievances they have about the other parent to make that parent plan into their hands.

Parents need to realize that children are not always accurate reporters and that they do try to manipulate situations to their advantage.

## But Mom (or Dad) Said Yes

This game also is played by children to get their own way at the expense of one of the parents. Children know the kinds of events or activities that one parent may allow but not the other. This game particularly works well if the parent who allows the activity is outside the home. These children enlist that parent's support and if the other parent says no, children drop the bombshell – "but dad/mom said it would be OK". This also works when parents have different rules or responsibilities for the children. If possible, divorced parents should continue to try to present a united front to children and try to determine the position the other parent may take. Children need to know that while each parent may have different rules, the rules of the household in which they are residing when an issue arises should be followed.

## Blackmail

Children may try to manipulate a parent when they are feeling threatened by change or want their own way. Children may tell a parent they won't visit or they will go and live with the other parent if the parent has a new girlfriend/boyfriend, is going to remarry, tells the children they can't do something, or disciplines the children.

If this game is not brought to a halt, children gain power over the parent. Children need to understand that there are rules and consequences for broken rules and that parents must get on with their lives too.

## I'll Get Even With You

Children rarely understand the motivation and consequences for this game as they do for the other divorce games they play. Children sometimes display hurt and anger by acting differently from ways that have behaved before. Some children may be withdrawn or act violently towards themselves or others. Sometimes the child at home may be different from the at-school child.

Parents who are understanding and have good communication with children may be able to address the problems and help children resolve the feelings of hurt and anger. Some children may need professional help and should be involved in counseling.