

Adult Children of Divorce: The Invisible Children

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How would it benefit your adult children to speak with a Neutral Child Specialist during your Collaborative Divorce Process? How would it benefit you, their parents?

Research indicates that divorce is life's second highest stressor, second only to the death of a loved one. If this is true, why is it so common for divorcing parents to assume that their adult children are "ok", simply because they are adults? Children of divorce, whether adults or minors, are experiencing multiple losses: the loss of their family, the loss of their family's world, the loss of their parents as a unit, the loss of their parents as parents, the loss of their family home and the loss of the security and stability which they have previously known. When their parents divorce, adult children experience most of the same feelings as minor children experience. Adult children report feeling shock, disorientation, depression, anxiety, sleep and appetite disturbance, embarrassment, anger, grief, guilt, shame, abandonment, rejection, and role-reversal in that they often feel that they need to take charge and become a parent to their parents.

Depending on the phases of adulthood, your adult children may be experiencing the following:

College age children are especially vulnerable in that they are in the transition of emerging from the turmoil of adolescence and they do not yet have a life of their own. They are typically still financially dependent on their parents but expected to cope as adults. The stable home life they once knew no longer exists as a back up. They may feel conflicted, drained and exhausted by vacations. The emotional turmoil of their parents divorce can make it difficult for them to focus on their friendships and studies. Making life-altering decisions can become extremely difficult.

Upon graduating from college, adult children may begin to more seriously question the meaning of commitment and family. It may be difficult for them to take steps toward career and marriage when their familial foundations feel shaky. Adult children often report that it seems that, just as they are coming to terms with the reality of growing up and moving away from their family and into the world, the reality they knew growing up no longer exists.

Adult children who are well established in adult life, married with children, home and career, may experience that their current life, which is rooted in their familial past, may no longer feel so firmly rooted. The responsibilities of their own nuclear families, coupled with the additional responsibilities they may feel for the well being of their now divorcing parents, can cause them tremendous stress. Complicated by their parents' divorce, such accumulating pressures can become overwhelming for the adult child in this stage of life. Because these adult children are in such a "mature" stage of adulthood, their world typically does not offer support to them regarding their parents' divorce. The underlying message from our culture is to deny their distress and pain regarding their parents' divorce.

When adult children have the opportunity to speak with a Neutral Child Specialist, they are able to discuss the above issues in a safe, neutral environment with a professional who has the training

and expertise not only to answer their questions and provide them with information about the new life situations they are experiencing, but also to assist them plan how best to navigate their changing lives.

The benefit to you as their parents is that the Neutral Child Specialist sensitizes you, the parents, to the needs of your adult children in the context of your divorce and gives you useful information about the restructuring your family is experiencing, so you can be the best co-parents possible for your adult children. Your spousal relationship is ending, but your co-parenting relationship lasts forever, no matter how old your children are. You will always be your children's **other parent**. The Neutral Child Specialist can assist you to create the legacy you want for your adult children: a peaceful, restructured family with amicable, cooperative and respectful co-parents who understand the needs of their adult children.

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Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., is a licensed marriage, family and child therapist, a board-certified clinical hypnotherapist, an EMDR therapist and a former professor of Human Services at Saddleback College. In private practice in Laguna Hills, CA, since 1983, Dr. Hughes is a respected expert and sought-after speaker on the effects of divorce on children. In 2003 she became one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County, and is also a co-founder of and trainer for the Collaborative Divorce Education Institute in Orange County, CA, a non-profit organization, whose mission is to educate the public about peaceful options for divorce, as well as to provide quality training for collaborative divorce professionals. She frequently trains and mentors collaborative practitioners and has appeared on the Time Warner Public television series "How to Get a Divorce". Carol has been a presenter at conferences of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals and at California's annual statewide conferences for collaborative professionals. In 2011 Carol was honored with the Eureka Award, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions and demonstrated an abiding dedication to establishing and sustaining Collaborative Practice in California. For a complete listing of her collaborative practice training and teaching workshops please visit www.CollaborativePractice.com, the website of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, and click on the "Locate a Collaborative Professional near you" link. In addition, please visit her website at www.DivorcePeacemaking.com and www.CDEI.info.