

# Separating Siblings in the Divorce



*In deciding the custody arrangements of your divorce, are you trying to decide if you and your soon-to-be-ex should divide the children between you? This article will give you insights into the idea of separating siblings and why it is not the best idea for the children.*

by Linda Ranson Jacobs

Many times when two adults make the decision to divorce, the divorce process becomes their entire focus. Rarely are the decisions and the division of property decided upon in calm moments. Many times because an adult's focus is the divorce and "Am I getting a fair deal?" the children get pushed to the background. Then one parent throws the idea into the mix of separating the children. The mindset of "you take one child, and I'll take one child" is rarely of benefit to the children. Generally, it is not in the best interest of children for them to be separated from each other. While two adults may not realize it, their children are losing a parent and the only home they have known. This alone is monumental. Now if the children are separated also, they will have layers of grief to process. Divorce is a grieving process for children. They grieve the death of their once-intact family.

## **Loneliness**

It is natural for siblings to turn to each other and help each other during the divorce. One big concern for children is the loneliness they face after the divorce. A sibling who is present can help with the loneliness. Judith Wallerstein reports in the book *What About*

*the Kids?* that "only children" have a harder time adjusting to divorce. They feel very isolated. Plus they feel they have to carry the burden of divorce all by themselves with no one who understands it. They feel they have no one to share their thoughts, trials and fears with. If you separate your children, they each become an "only child" in the respective single parent home.

## **Split Loyalties**

Children have split loyalties in the divorce. They love the dad and yet they also love their mom. They don't want to hurt one parent by appearing to take the other parent's side. Children constantly have to juggle their feelings and their loyalties. Many children of divorce feel like they are almost keeping secrets from a parent all the time by trying to stay loyal to each. This is a heavy burden to carry alone. When there is a sibling in the same home, they have the ability to share the burden.

Most children rely on their parents when they are scared or lonely. And that is as it should be. When a divorce happens, there are times they can't rely on "the parent" because "the parent" can't go with them to the other parent's home. Siblings rely on each other at these times. In her book *Between Two*

*Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*, Elizabeth Marquardt says children of divorce have reported they are always saying good-bye to a parent. In order to say “hello” to one parent, you have to say “good-bye” to the other parent. Do you want your children having to face this alone?

### **They Worry Together**

Siblings in a divorce have the ability to worry together. And worry they will. As a parent you may not be able to see past the divorce at this moment, but imagine this future scenario. The other parent is supposed to pick the children up at 5:00 p.m. on a Friday evening. The other parent has to work late and calls to let you know. As an adult you are okay with this. But children are not. Inside they may think their other parent is not coming. They will turn to their sibling and ask, “Do you think dad (or mom) is really coming to get us tonight?” They will share the “what ifs” together. “What if Dad’s been in a wreck?” Or “What if mom has a boyfriend and she really wants to see him more than us?” As a parent you may never know they are worrying together. Siblings come to rely on each other. As time goes by and you have to work late, they have another person to eat with. They can plan what to do for holidays and birthdays together. Remember there is not going to be another parent there to help them plan for your birthday or a present for you for Christmas. They will rely on each other.

If you separate the children, when are they going to have their time together as siblings? When will they giggle and share their secrets with each other? When will they tease each other and grow up together? When and how will they create their memories if they are always apart?

### **Entering the Stepfamily Arena**

If one of you remarries, which is more than likely to happen, and there are stepchildren involved, do you want one of your children to have to face that alone? Birth siblings need each other when they enter the stepfamily arena.

1 John 2:10 says, “Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.” Siblings need each other. They are family with Mom, and they are family with Dad.

#### References:

*What About the Kids?* By Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee (Hyperion, New York)

*Between Two Worlds, The Inner Live of Children of Divorce* by Elizabeth Marquardt (Crown Publishers, New York)

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