

The last thing you likely would want your children to learn from you is that living in a perpetual state of unhappiness is an acceptable outcome for them. Unfortunately and even with the very best of intentions, the message you pass along to your children by allowing yourself to be constantly steeped in misery or resentment provides them with the model for what may well be in store for them. Coping with misery inspires many strategies, including distance, self-medication with alcohol or drugs, sleep, depression, overeating, blame-shifting, martyrdom, self-deprecation and a general wearing of your sense of hopelessness. Whatever your coping strategy may be, it necessarily becomes modeling for your keenly observant children. If you do not possess the capacity or will to solve the issues cultivating your chronic misery, it follows that the most loving thing for you to do is to change the situation from which the misery flows. Being unsuccessful in some relationships is just a part of being human. Being unsuccessful in looking for the love, even in unsuccessful relationships, is *not* a necessary part of being human. I assure you there is love to be found, even ---and maybe especially--- in this situation.

The first and guiding principle is simple and absolute: *The best gift you can give your children is to love their mother.* Above all things, be true to this principle. Get this part wrong and little of what follows amounts to much. Even when you and she cannot see eye to eye, you can still see the best in each other. Your willingness to see the best in her ultimately cultivates the best in you, and I assure you your children will notice that is so.

Always look at your actions through your children's lenses. Children are excellent, constant and insightful observers, even if they do not express that being so. The situation in which you all find yourselves is *not* about *you*, but, rather, it is *all* about *them*. I invite you to consider that it is valuable for you to share with them your journey, its textures and insights, warts and all, openly discussing successes and failures, fears and triumphs, as you lean into the challenges this new period of your lives delivers. Never, ever forget that everything you do, much of what you say and even a bit of what you think will by nature likely become deeply imprinted into your children's sense of what is possible for them. Every moment in their presence is an invitation to focus on and embrace the love at hand and to create love where none is apparent.

When physical separation is at hand, choose to live near enough to facilitate the children's ability to go to their same schools, to maintain their same friends, to go to their same church, to be parts of their same teams, to not be uprooted and disassociated. This does not mean to live next door, which likely would exacerbate some of the challenges you and their mother face moving forward. Select a residence which provides privacy for the children without simultaneously making them feel disconnected or distant. Both residences should be able to facilitate pets, too.

If you do not already have a dog, get one. The dog will be with your children wherever they are, thereby creating a consistent focus, bond and loving familiarity.

Be prepared to duplicate such items as make life comfortable and familiar for your children. Consider having both residences have such items as bicycles, entertainment/learning equipment or facilities, clothing, toiletries, toys and sporting/recreational equipment. It is best for there to not be great or obvious divergence in the quantity or quality of those items, for to do so sets up the potential for inequity which may disadvantage you or their mother.

If it turns out that you leave the marriage with more affluence, you should share your bounty with her, especially in such ways as help the children not be impacted by any true and unmet needs. Consider generously beautifying her life as is possible, rather than as is required legally.

Agree to a visitation/custody schedule which assures that each of you has the children for at least three consecutive days per week. For example, you could have the children Sunday through Tuesday, she could have them Thursday through Saturday, and Wednesdays alternate between you and her. Both you and she should be freely flexible in accommodating reasonable schedule variations, and time with the children should never be a score-keeping event. This sort of schedule allows both of you to attend to your worldly needs when the children are away, and it assures a glad focus on and celebration of the children when they arrive for your time together.

Even though it is natural for the children to desire to be away from one another at times, resist the temptation to separate them at all, even if briefly.

If you decide to see other women, carefully consider keeping that part of your life sealed from the children until such time as you can explain freely and with precision exactly what the new person is doing in all of your lives. Again, this is *not* about you and your experiences in dating. Being considerate of their mother's feelings is similarly important, especially so because of the potential hurt she may experience in seeing you in the company of someone else.

You should be prepared to celebrate special occasions together with the children and their mother, working out whatever issues may make that uncomfortable at first.

Above all, take the foregoing with a grain of salt, for even the very best solutions and strategies for dealing with separation and divorce are lame and inadequate. Consider and reconsider the wisdom in and the certainty of needing to abandon your marriage. No matter what you do or say, at some level the children will judge themselves as unlovable, unworthy, simply not enough for you to stay together. They are likely to conclude that they are the problem. It is only possible to minimize the pain and dislocation, and to that end all involved need to be dedicated. I assure you that your efforts will be rewarded manifold.