

Getting Along for the Kids

Woman Magazine, February 2005

Did you happen to catch the television show, *The 101 Most Amazing, Memorable, Incredibly Exciting, Talked About Forever, Hollywood Moments of 2004*? I'm a little fuzzy on the show's exact title.

Sandwiched between Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction and Ashlee Simpson's lip-synching malfunction was a segment featuring actress Demi Moore, ex-husband Bruce Willis, their children, and Demi's boyfriend Ashton Kutcher. This moment made the list, as far as I can tell, because two divorced parents arrived together at a movie premier with their children – and the divorced Mom's new love interest.

What is it about these divorced parents – parents who have obviously moved past the disappointment and bitterness of divorce for the sake of their children – that make their public appearance with their children so memorable?

Okay, so I'm ignoring our celebrity-obsessed culture. But becoming good co-parents after divorce should be the number one priority for celebrity and non-celebrity parents. And the first step to healthy co-parenting is shedding any leftover divorce anger. People can't be good co-parents if they are still angry with the child's other parent.

At its worst, unresolved anger directed at the other parent after a divorce is a symptom of parental alienation, a highly destructive family dynamic. In parental alienation, one parent deliberately damages, and in some cases destroys, the previously healthy, loving relationship between his or her child and the child's other parent. In severe parental alienation the alienating parent and child work together to successfully eliminate the previously loved Mom or Dad from the child's life.

But even parents who don't go out of their way to antagonize their ex-spouses should still pay attention to the messages they may unintentionally send their children about the child's other parent. For example, did you ever notice that before a divorce, a parent usually refers to the other parent as "Mom" or "Dad," but after a divorce "Mom" becomes "your Mom" and "Dad" becomes "your Dad?" The parent's subtle change tells the child, "You are still connected to that person. I'm not." As if that connection required a warning label.

In an ideal world, divorced parents would quickly forgive any real or imagined wrongdoing by their former spouse in the interest of co-parenting. Divorced parents would also recognize that divorce is a loss. It is natural for emotionally healthy people to get angry over loss. However it is also natural for emotionally healthy parents to accept their new post-divorce realities and create new, healthy realities for their children.

Any parent who stays angry over his or her divorce needs to ask why he or she can't move on. Obviously, a mental health professional can help the parent come up with some potential answers – and solutions.

Healthy distractions help people move on. Friendships help an individual feel good about him or herself. Exercise reduces the stress and tension a person carries around during difficult times. Writing in a journal or diary produces the same result on an emotional level. Finally, talking to other people about the negative emotions is a good way to let go and move forward. Feelings acknowledged ultimately disappear. Feelings denied often result in little to no change.