

Parenting after Parting – Middle Class Couples “The Worst” ?

“In the children’s best interests”; a phrase often used in the family courts and enshrined in the Children Act 1989. But how many separated parents find themselves bandying it around when what they really mean is “in *my* best interests”?

Mr Justice Wall, England’s most senior family law judge, has criticised middle-class parents who drag their children into power struggles between the adults when a marriage or relationship ends.

In a speech to Families Need Fathers, he said that parents who demonise each other in contact feuds damaged their children’s sense of self-worth. He seems to imply that well-educated couples who do this should know better (rather an assumption that education equals emotional literacy and insight!).

Whether you are well-educated or not, separating from your other half is traumatic : your way of life and sense of security may feel under threat and chaotic thoughts rule the day. It is no wonder that divorce is viewed by many as a form of bereavement, with all of the natural feelings that arise from such an important loss in your life. It is a truism that anger is a display of underlying grief.

Even when a parent is determined to put the children first, it can be difficult to maintain a balanced view of how things should be done, particularly if the breakdown between the parents has been acrimonious. It isn’t unusual for both Mum and Dad to see their children as extensions of themselves at times like these, or to want them to be on “their side”.

But children aren’t our counsellors or confidantes– they are dependent on us for their sense of identity and worth. Most want to see each parent regularly – and not hear each parent criticise the other to them. After all, a child has the DNA of both Mum and Dad : to hear one parent being spoken of disrespectfully by the other is an implicit criticism of the child him or herself !

What does it mean in reality to say that you put the children first? For example, when the other parent fails to pay child support, or refuses to make contact run smoothly, or has got a new partner you may not like? That is when a commitment to children’s emotional well-being and your

own maturity is really tested. Words are easy : really putting your children first and above your own feelings is hard.

Financial issues are by no means always easy to sort out on relationship-breakdown – but ultimately, a pot of money can be divided and the couple can move on. What cannot be resolved so easily are the ongoing issues surrounding co-parenting : it is easy to forget that once lawyers are out of the picture, having assisted with divorce or financial matters, a couple will go on being parents for the rest of their lives. It is the most important job they will ever do.

Our courts are saturated with cases brought by unhappy parents who have not been able to find a way to navigate their difficulties regarding parenting. Often, they feel unable to talk to each other openly. The court system, however, is a very blunt instrument to crack a very delicate nut : it is dealing with children in abusive and neglectful homes and would much prefer that parents who do love and care for their children find a talking method of resolving their disagreements. After all, no judge cares for your children more than you do in these circumstances.

Resolution, the national body for family lawyers who are dedicated to trying to make separation and divorce less painful, has been piloting “Parenting after Parting” classes. They have had a good take up and may be rolled out nationally. Relate also run parenting classes. Neither are designed in any way to “blame” parents or to make them feel guilty : they are simply there to help couples come up with coping strategies to help them navigate the sometimes choppy waters of post-separation parenting. It may not be the case that you and your ex will agree on many things – but if you can agree that your children’s emotional security comes above everything else, such classes may prove invaluable.

Southampton-based law firm Trethowans provides assistance in all aspects of family law. Contact Yvette Rooke, Partner, to discuss your situation confidentially.

