

Don't Bad-Mouth Divorcing Parents In Front Of Children; Criticizing a Parent Also Hurts Kids

By Honorable Anne Kass.

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It's been said a million times.

Divorced parents should not bad-mouth each other. It hurts the children. It has not, however, been said often enough that other family member and friends of divorced parents also should not degrade either parent to or in the presence of children.

That also hurts the children.

Children see themselves as half of each parent. When children hear bad things about one parent, they hear bad things about half of themselves. If they hear bad things about both their parents, they feel that both halves of themselves must be of little worth.

I may have a special insight into this issue that comes from my childhood. Maybe some of you have had similar experiences.

Until I was 5, my parents, my brother, and I lived with my paternal grandparents on a farm in South Dakota. My father is an only child. From his mother's (my grandmother's) point of view, no woman in the world ever could be good enough for her only son.

I remember that my grandmother used to criticize my mother. She'd say things to me or in my presence about my mother's shortcomings, little things such as, "Your mother can't cook or she doesn't clean house right."

I vividly remember my grandmother saying bad things about my mother. And even though I'm 45 now and I can intellectually understand what was behind my grandmother's, I can still feel the hurt I felt when she put my mother down.

When divorce happens, it's not only the parents who take sides. Often the aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends take sides as well.

Divorcing parents are always ready to tell anyone who'll listen about why the failed marriage was the other one's fault. They want family members and friends to be on their side. Often they make it known that from their perspective if you're not on their side, if you're not with them, you must be against them.

It's awfully hard not to sympathize with someone you know who's going through the pain of divorce. The sympathy can take the form of verbalizing the flaws of the other spouse. But we all need to remember not to talk about a parent's flaws to the children, and we need to be careful about talking when young ears can overhear.

Staying neutral when someone we love is going through the agony of divorce can be difficult, but it's one of the kindest things we can do their children.

The adage holds: "If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all"