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## The Good Divorce

The "good divorce" is not an oxymoron. The simple truth is that while there are bad divorces, there are also good ones. And it's never too late to have a good divorce.

**By Constance Ahrons, Ph. D.**

There is nothing sacred about defining a family as those who live together in one household. We've just gotten stuck in our outdated singular idea that a nuclear family is the only "real" family. The reality is that most families continue to be families after divorce, even if they don't look quite the same as those nuclear families we're used to. Instead of all living under one roof, members of divorced families span two -- or even three or four -- households. These maternal and paternal households, which may or may not include stepparents and step- and half-siblings, form what I call a "binuclear family." Although divorce changes the structure of the family from nuclear to binuclear, families continue to do pretty much the same things they always have: care for and socialize children, form close personal bonds, and take care of their members' financial needs.

I coined the term "binuclear" almost 20 years ago, when, during the course of my research on how families reorganize after divorce, and in my clinical work, I heard the hundreds of divorced parents speaking out about their need to feel normal. They were upset and angry that their children were being stigmatized as coming from a "broken home," or being told they didn't even have a family because their parents were divorced. I wanted to counter this negative image by normalizing families of divorce: by putting them on the same footing as nuclear families, and by challenging the notion that nuclear families are "intact" families.

### The need for healthy post-divorce role models

Because society still equates divorce with pathology and with the destruction of the family, we are inundated with negative images and stories about divorce. Stories of well-functioning parents and children after divorce just don't make headlines. As the young daughter of a friend of mine noted, "Why do they call the news 'news'? They should call it 'bad news' 'cause that's all they show!" When was the last time you read about a normal family of divorce, with two healthy kids, and two responsible parents who are getting on with the dailyness of their lives? Because of this bias towards deviance or pathology, we lack a range of good role models that can help guide us towards maintaining and building healthy families after divorce. There are many routes by which people reach this end -- a civil, well-functioning two-parent family -- even if the ex-spouses start as badly as my first husband and I did.

The "good divorce" is not an oxymoron. The simple truth is that while there are bad divorces, there are also good ones. While some divorces result in serious problems for their families, many do not. Millions now live with the reality of divorce as a normal passage in their lives, and the research shows that about one-half of these families manage to forge constructive relationships. Although good divorces are as varied as good marriages, they have important common denominators -- namely, the absence of malice and a mutual concern for the well-being of children. The partners have similar goals: to maintain their family relationships while moving ahead with their separate lives.

One factor that researchers and clinicians have found to be of major importance to the functioning of nuclear families is the relationship that exists between the spouses. The same remains true for families of divorce: the relationship between ex-spouses is an important factor in the functioning of the binuclear family. Spouses -- and ex-spouses -- determine the emotional climate of the family. And just as married spouses have a range of relationship styles, so do divorced spouses.

### The five categories of ex-spouse relationships

Although our stereotype of divorced spouses is one of angry warriors dueling to the finish, in reality ex-spouse relationships range from very friendly to very angry, with a continuum of permutations between the two extremes. In my research, as a way to better understand some of the complexities of ex-spouse relationships, we divided them into five categories.

The amicable group separated into two distinct smaller groups. The majority of them were named "Cooperative Colleagues." They are couples who cope with their anger in productive ways. They manage their conflicts well and the children don't get caught in the middle. One of the major characteristics of this group is their ability to separate their parental responsibilities from their spousal discontents.

A second group of amicable couples, whom I called "Perfect Pals," were a small but significant minority who remain best friends after divorce. They continue to enjoy an intimate, although usually non-sexual, relationship. Their relationships have some conflicts, and anger flares at times, but they remain close and caring.

The remaining 50% of couples fit the prevailing stereotypes. These couples were arch-enemies. They divided almost equally into two groups: "Angry Associates" and "Fiery Foes." Interestingly, what differentiates Angry Associates from Cooperative Colleagues is not so much the amount of their anger, but rather how they express it. Angry Associates are not able to confine their anger to their marital differences; it infuses all the relationships in the family.

The Fiery Foes were the real prototypical examples of bad divorces. These couples' rage taints their families' lives, leaving continued pain and distress for years afterward. Fiery Foes are the ones who make headlines, having custody battle after custody battle, resorting sometimes to violence in their pursuit of revenge.

A fifth type -- "Dissolved Duos" -- are those ex-spouses who totally discontinue contact with each other, and one parent disappears completely from his or her children's lives. Thankfully, this is rare. Even the worst parent usually tries to maintain some contact, and usually -- unless there's a history of criminality, abuse, or insanity -- the primary parent allows some minimal contact.

#### Relationships change

Why are the typologies important? Because the style of interaction and communication a couple develops post-divorce affects all their future relationships. Interestingly, not only does the type of post-divorce relationship a couple develops affect the entire functioning of their family, but it carries over into their remarriages.

However, relationships aren't static, and many different changes can and do occur over time. Since my research included interviews of the same people three times over five years, I was able to study how couples moved from one category to another.

Many events will continue to bring binuclear families together over the years, such as graduations, bar mitzvahs, and weddings. To make these events the joyous occasions they should be, divorced spouses must find ways to have some kind of relationship -- a limited partnership -- that permits the bond of kinship to continue. It's much like an extended family, except that we lack relational names for many of the kinfolk. We need to invent new language for our binuclear family relationships, so that we don't all walk around tongue-tied when we try to introduce our ex-husband's current wife to our current husband's daughter by his first marriage!

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