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Ask a Therapist

My adult kids won’t see their father after our divorce. What should I do?

People sometimes distance themselves from one parent or another for reasons that can be complicated.

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(Celia Jacobs for The Washington Post)

Guest column by Joshua Coleman

My husband and I waited until our son and daughter were in college before deciding to divorce. While we tried to handle the separation as reasonably as possible, our adult children are now refusing to see their father. I was a stay-at-home mother, and he traveled a lot for work. They're now saying he wasn't there for them emotionally, which I kind of understand. Part of the reason we divorced is that he's not a very emotional person but I also think he was dedicated in the ways he knew how to be, as a more traditional man and father. I've tried to stay out of it, but I can see how much he's hurting — and I feel some guilt about not encouraging them to reconnect more than I have. They've said that it's between them and their dad, which I understand. But I don't know if I should be doing more, or if it's even my place. I just don't know what's right.

Your instinct to tread carefully is wise. After a divorce, adult children sometimes distance themselves from one parent for reasons that are complex and not always clear. At the same time, it's understandable that you'd feel some responsibility — especially if you're the parent to whom they've stayed close.

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Here's how you can navigate this difficult terrain with integrity and compassion.

Separate your emotions from theirs

It's easy to blur the lines between what you feel about your ex and what's truly best for your kids. Sometimes we believe we're honoring their boundaries, when in reality, we may feel some unconscious satisfaction in being the “chosen” parent. That doesn't make you a bad person — it makes you human. But it's important to develop awareness of those emotional crosscurrents.

Are your children acting out of loyalty to you?

Your children may be keeping their distance less because of a direct rupture with their father and more as a gesture of care and concern for you. Have you — consciously or not — said or done things that could make them feel they're expected to take your side?

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Even casual remarks — past or present — to friends or family can linger in memory. If that's the case, let them know that they don't need to carry your pain or show allegiance by pulling away from him. Children don't easily forget what's said about the other parent, and advising them to try to stay in contact may be at odds with the negative, hostile or critical things you may have said about him.

You might also remind them of how he has contributed to their lives. For example, adult children sometimes blame the working parent for being less present, without recognizing the sacrifices made to provide for the family. Naming those contributions can restore balance to the narrative.

Ask your children: Is contact truly unsafe — or just uncomfortable?

You should never push reconciliation if being in touch with a parent would put your children at real emotional risk. But if the other parent is flawed rather than harmful, you can still make a case for the potential healing and value in reconnection. Let them know you believe more love — not less — is a good thing, and that people and relationships can evolve over time.

Make sure they feel heard

What feels forgivable or minor to you may have landed differently with your kids. Before you advocate for their dad, make sure your children know you've genuinely tried to understand their reasons for pulling away. That validation can open the door to a more open conversation. At the same time, resist the urge to agree too heartily with their complaints about him as a father if they mirror yours as a spouse. The conversation should be more about them than you.

Acknowledge what you may have shared

If, in the aftermath of the divorce, you may have overshared with your children — especially about painful or private matters like infidelity or when you were feeling hurt or angry — it might help to revisit those disclosures with honesty: Saying “I mentioned things I shouldn't have, and I regret putting you in that position,” can go a long way toward restoring boundaries.

Communicate with compassion — to your ex

Even if you believe he played a role in their withdrawal, he's still grieving the loss of connection with them and deserves your help as the other parent. A simple, empathetic message can be meaningful, such as: “I've encouraged them to reconnect, and I also feel like it's in their best interest to do so. I've recommended that they go to family therapy with you or with me there if that would help. For now, they're refusing, and I don't feel like I have the power to force them into contact with you, but I promise to revisit the topic in a few months.” Approaching him in this way demonstrates compassion for him without taking on more responsibility than you can manage.

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Rethink your information boundaries

If you've taken a firm stance on not sharing updates about your kids with him, check in with yourself: Is this really about protecting them, or is it a holdover from hurt? Adult children still benefit from both parents being in the loop, especially when those parents can engage without dragging the past into every interaction. If your adult child is engaging in dangerous activities, is at risk in other ways, or has medical issues, you should consider letting your children know that you're not comfortable keeping this information from him.

Divorce doesn't end our responsibility to the other parent as an influence in our children's lives. While we can't force a reconciliation with the other parent, we can model clarity, compassion and accountability. We might not feel like an ex deserves that. But we owe it to our children to try.

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Joshua Coleman, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in the San Francisco Bay Area and senior fellow with the Council on Contemporary Families. His newest book is “[Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties and How to Heal the Conflict](#).”

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