

Grandparents – the forgotten casualties

Grandparents are the overlooked casualties of divorce. In this idea we will look at the ways in which grandparents are affected by divorce and what they can do so they don't become a forgotten statistic.



Everyone focuses on the couple divorcing and, of course, the welfare of any child of a broken marriage is paramount. But who remembers the grandparents? What happens to the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren when divorce rocks their world?

THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

Many couples are often stunned that their parents relate to their grandchildren in a way they never experienced during their own childhood. Parents who were notoriously stern and uncompromising act like human marshmallows when their

Here's an
idea for
you...

Do you see less of your grandchildren that you did before the divorce? If so, try these simple ideas to keep in contact. Do you miss reading to your grandchildren? Well, you don't have to. Record chapters of a book on tape and put them in the post for a bedtime treat. Children love to get mail, so start posting cards, snapshots, letters and silly drawings to them regularly. Get online and send emails and jokes, and what about a webcam to have some face-to-face contact? SMS mobile messages are a great way to stay in frequent contact cheaply, and instant messaging on your computer gives you the feel of a real conversation.

grandchildren arrive. It seems the love a grandparent has for a grandchild is truly unconditional. The perfect little children of their own offspring become the centre of their world in an instant. The tragedy is, that it only takes an instant for the centre of their world to be knocked from their reach entirely.

So, why does this special relationship exist in the first place? There are many reasons why such a strong bond can be formed, not least because the love grandparents have for their grandchildren includes all the love they also have for their own child. It's a double whammy of feeling, but unfortunately one that's open to double the jeopardy when divorce looms.

Grandparents can have the best of both worlds – all the love for their grandchildren without all of the responsibility of their upbringing. They can be a shoulder to cry on and a trusted friend in a way a parent can't. There is a special relationship between the young and the old that no one can quite describe. Put simply the grandparental relationship is magical.

REALITY CHECK

Divorce kills many things. And one fatality is magic. With so many things to consider during the process of divorce, it is perhaps unsurprising that some things are forgotten. However, it is not acceptable to forget about the feelings of the grandparents.

In some cases, grandparents are far from forgotten. When a couple with children divorces, one partner inevitably becomes a single parent. If that parent has to work full time, childcare becomes an important issue. Rather than using an expensive, and often impersonal, childminding service or nursery, many parents ask the grandparents to step into the breach.

Almost all take on this responsibility willingly and with love, but many also do so with a heavy heart. Grandparents who had planned and saved for their retirement can find themselves thrown into a very different life. Day-to-day care of their grandchildren can be a strain on financial resources as well as their energy reserves – young children can be tiring; older children emotionally draining.

Of course, the grandparents will be concerned about the effects that the divorce is having on their child as well as their grandchild. Divorce can cause emotional trauma similar to bereavement for all concerned. Grandparents often have few legal rights of access to their

Suddenly a step-grandparent and not sure how to deal with it? Take a look at IDEA 32, *The wicked step-parent*, for advice.

Try another idea...

'Divorce makes grandparents feel as though all that unconditional love they have to give is suddenly surplus to requirements.'

TONY PARSONS, *Man and Boy*

Defining idea...

grandchildren and can be left with no contact at all. They can also feel deeply saddened by the loss of a son- or daughter-in-law and understandably feel unable to express this grief to their own child.

Remarriage after divorce is another factor which can affect grandparents. It can take their own grandchildren even further away from them physically and emotionally, and it can also present them with a set of step-grandchildren.

Grandparents can find it hard to accept a replacement son- or daughter-in-law for a number of reasons – loyalty to the ex-spouse or protective feelings towards their own child being the most common. Equally, accepting their step-grandchildren can bring its own problems, especially when those step-grandchildren are teenagers. No bond has been created as they grow with cuddles, kisses and games in the garden, and it can take much time and patience to create a workable relationship. However, grandparents, step or otherwise, can provide stability and support during the trauma of a divorce.

Then there are the cases when it is the grandparents themselves who divorce, leaving their families shocked and their grandchildren behind. It can be particularly difficult for grandfathers to keep in touch with their grandchildren in these situations as bonds are often created through the maternal line.

Whatever the situation, grandparents are special to a family, and as such should be central to it too.

Q I've tried letters and emails but I still feel I'm losing touch with my grandchild's life. What else can I do?

How did it go?

A How about exchanging scrapbooks? Make up a scrapbook of everything you're doing in your life. A picture of a cake you made, a bit of grass from the garden stuck in with glue, a squirt of your favourite perfume, a picture of you mending the car and a silly joke will work a treat.

Q What legal rights do I have to see my grandchildren?

A This varies greatly, so it's best to take legal advice. But you and your grandchild do have a moral right to a loving relationship with each other.

