

**DIVORCE, FAMILY STYLE •**

\$2.25 • OCTOBER 8, 1990

# NEW YORK

## 44 Divorce, Family Style

BY MELINDA BLAU

For divorced couples still linked by their children, the whole range of family relations can become skewed and divisive. Men and women who've coped share their strategies.

**CONTACT:**

Melinda Blau  
4 Crescent Street  
Northampton, MA 01060  
[413] 586-9090

# DIVORCE, FAMILY STYLE

HOW TO MAKE SPLITTING UP  
EASIER ON THE CHILDREN

— BY —  
MELINDA BLAU

**T**EN YEARS AGO, WHEN MY HUSBAND AND I SEPARATED, WE couldn't face each other. We fought over money, custody, the Rembrandt etching, the neon clock in our Fire Island house. Obligated to appear together at the children's school or a doctor's appointment, we did it with clenched teeth. The idea that I'd have to share the children with Mark for the rest of my life was unbearable—and yet I was painfully aware that though our ties as a couple had been severed in court, we would always be a family.

Last year, when Judith Wallerstein's *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce* became a best-seller, every review awakened my old feelings of guilt, doubt, and fear. Wallerstein's study had documented the dire consequences for children triggered by their parents' divorce—consequences like the "overburdened-child syndrome" and the insidious "sleeper effect," which tends to derail young adults years after the divorce. I had no intention of buying the book; I didn't need a long-term study to remind me that divorce is a "wrenching, long-lasting experience."

And yet, by the time Wallerstein's sobering report was attracting attention, Mark and I had come a long way. We had jointly produced our son's bar mitzvah. To celebrate our daughter's eighteenth birthday, we had spent a "family" weekend in

VACATIONING TOGETHER ARE, LEFT TO RIGHT, JEFFRY GALPER; HIS DAUGHTER, SARAH; HER MOTHER, JEFFRY'S CURRENT WIFE, NICANDRA; JEFFRY'S EX-WIFE, MIRIAM GALPER COHEN; HER HUSBAND, HERB COHEN; AND JOSH GALPER (MIRIAM AND JEFFRY'S SON).

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBIN HOLLAND

San Francisco, each bunking with a same-sex child. That year I prepared Thanksgiving dinner for both families—his and mine. “We get along fine,” Mark told someone recently. “When we get together for events involving the kids, you’d think we were still married.”

Over the years, our children—eight and almost twelve at the time of the split—have cheered us on, delighted by our increasing maturity and our decision to lay down our swords, get on with our individual lives, and still be there for them.

**I**F WAR IS HELL, DIVORCE IS PURGATORY. Especially at the beginning, when couples are separating physically, emotionally, and legally, the fallout can damage children’s heads and hearts. In this “acute” stage—which, for some, lasts as long as two years—many parents are, as one woman admitted, “blighted by rage.”

Preoccupied with their own anguish, they unwittingly put their children last, sometimes for years. One parent confessed, “I’ve had too many tears in my eyes to see my children clearly.” Sadly, such couples may win individual battles—to gain ownership of a prized possession or be the one who’s invited to old friends’ parties. But in the end, they lose the war, and their children are the casualties. Still, not all couples stay stuck in the problem. After all, if people can “recover” from alcoholism, compulsive gambling, even incest, why can’t they recover from divorce?

“It’s not the dissolution of the marriage that hurts kids,” says Neil Kalter, director of the University of Michigan Center for the Child and Family and author of *Growing Up With Divorce*. “It won’t be devastating if an adult is solid inside, resilient, psychologically supportive, and can provide an emotional safety net for the children in a time of crisis.”

Kalter calls divorce “social surgery.” Just as we didn’t know much about physical surgery at the turn of the century, he says, mental-health professionals are only beginning to understand the after-effects of divorce. “We hope we can make it safer, as we’ve made surgery safer,” he says, “but it’ll never be entirely painless.”

Even Judith Wallerstein believes parents can lessen children’s unhappiness after the breakup of a marriage: “Of

course I think it’s possible to be cooperative co-parents! There’s no point in studying divorce if you don’t think you can do something about it. Somehow,” she laments, “I haven’t gotten the right message across. I’m not saying people shouldn’t get divorced. I’m saying, ‘Let’s do it better.’”

Some people already are doing it better. In Wallerstein’s sample, 46 percent of the children surveyed were back on track ten to fifteen years after divorce: They were doing all right in school and seemed to have no significant psychological problems. That figure is consistent with the findings of Constance Ahrons, professor of sociology and a family therapist at the University of Southern California. Her book *Divorced Families* is a report on her ten-year study of “binuclear families” (her non-pejorative term for two-household families). About half of all divorces are functional, she says—that is, the adults negotiate the arduous process without plunging themselves or their children into “severe, debilitating crises.”

Ahrons is an outspoken advocate of the “normalization” of divorce. “We’re still looking at this life crisis—which affects one out of every two marriages—as a moral issue,” she says. “The message has to be changed. It isn’t fair to our children.”

Ahrons, twice divorced herself and the mother of two, is far from cavalier about

EX-SPOUSES RICK AND PHYLLIS DIAMOND.



STAYING CIVIL

**E**VEN IF IT’S MERE ‘ACTING’ FOR THE CHILDREN’S SAKE, IT HELPS DISSIPATE ANGER.

parental responsibility. “Having kids should mean a lifetime commitment, no matter what happens,” she stresses. “Divorced couples have a kinship relationship—and parenting is the bond.”

As for the age-old debate about whether children are better off when angry parents stay together, Neil Kalter maintains, “There are downsides to both. It’s not good for kids to be exposed day in and day out to a marriage that’s awful. The kids soak that up. It gets in their bones. Of the two alternatives—staying in an angry, loveless marriage or getting a functional divorce—a well-handled divorce is definitely the best-case scenario.”

FRIENDLY . . . DIVORCE?

**I**N HER STUDY, AHRONS IDENTIFIED FIVE types of post-divorce relationships, ranging from extremely friendly to hostile to no contact at all: Perfect Pals, Cooperative Colleagues, Angry Associates, Fiery Foes, and Dissolved Duos. The first two groups, which constitute about 50 percent of the sample, obviously have the best chances for a good co-parenting arrangement. Since every divorce is unique, boundaries between the subgroups are somewhat fluid—and couples can change categories over time.

Jeffrey Galper and Miriam Galper Cohen, divorced in 1975, are still Perfect Pals: They meet for family vacations with each other’s current spouses and visit in each other’s homes. Miriam was a guest at Jeff’s two subsequent weddings and even addressed the invitations for his second one. And when their child decided to move to Vermont to live with his father, Miriam says, “that first Mother’s Day, Jeff gave me \$1,000 to be used for transportation.”

If the Galper Cohen divorce sounds rare, it is. More often, when one or both spouses remarry, Perfect Pals (a relatively small percentage of Ahrons’s sample) become Cooperative Colleagues—which is probably the best arrangement for co-parenting. As Neil Kalter notes, “Some of the most depressed kids I’ve seen are from very friendly, civilized divorces.” They simply can’t understand why parents who are so happy with each other are getting a divorce, and such friendliness perpetuates the children’s fantasy that their parents will reunite.

Gail Connors\* and Carl Bosco\* started their split as Fiery Foes. In fact, their divorce was so acrimonious, it had the makings of a B movie. They were married in 1971; it was his second marriage, her first. In 1974, nine months after their son, Evan,\* was born, Gail, diagnosed as having cancer, had breast surgery, followed

\* Names starred with an asterisk have been changed.



LINKED FOREVER

**O**NE OF THE GREAT COSMIC JOKES IS THAT PEOPLE WHOSE TIES AS A COUPLE HAVE BEEN SEVERED IN COURT WILL ALWAYS BE IN EACH OTHER’S LIVES.

by several years of chemotherapy. “Carl couldn’t take it,” Gail says. “He was convinced I was going to die, so he went shopping for a new mommy.”

Initially, she had custody of their then-four-year-old son. She steadfastly refused to let Carl keep the boy overnight; eventually, when she suspected that Carl’s third wife was a substance abuser, she refused to let Evan see his father at all.

The turning point came the morning when Evan woke up paralyzed; he had suddenly developed Legg-Perthes disease, a transient bone condition. All at once, two estranged parents had to work as a team. “Carl was a champ. He rallied; he was really there for his son,” Gail acknowledges. The boy, in second grade at the time, eventually recovered. So did his parents. “It brought up feelings that I was needed,” remembers Carl, who says he had left the marriage largely because he felt displaced.

By 1984, the couple had become partners again—this time in their own law firm. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe I was ever married to him,” Gail says, “and sometimes I can’t believe we were ever divorced.”

Though many of the sixteen couples I interviewed for this article were bitter an-

tagonists when they split up, all of them are now models of competence and sanity. Certainly they did not get through the breakup of their marriages with constant maturity and grace; still, their concern for their children helped them rise, eventually, to the status of Cooperative Colleagues.

The road to a functional divorce, it became clear from my interviews with these couples and with the experts, has these signposts:

MATURITY—THE UNDERVALUED VIRTUE

**D**ANNY DEVITO DECLARED IN *The War of the Roses*, “Civilized divorce is a contradiction in terms.” And for many, it is. Some spouses are grievously wounded by the initial blow, and become deeply invested in the victim role. Others have been damaged by events that occurred long before their marriage—like their own parents’ divorce.

On the other hand, Wallerstein notes, some parents can take a good look at themselves and thus make the best of the

second chance divorce provides: “They reexamine assumptions about why the marriage failed, about roles and relationships and what they’re capable of doing.”

In Gail Connors’s case, for example, even though Carl’s behavior prior to the breakup was reprehensible, she can now admit that “I was blaming a lot of things about my own situation on him.”

If divorced spouses can’t get past blame right away, they at least must put it on hold when it comes to dealing with their children. The people interviewed for this article may have felt wounded, bitter, shocked, furious, or jealous, but they were aware of the importance of keeping such emotions away from their children. With varying degrees of success, all tried to separate their marital woes from their parental role.

“We’re not asking for hypocrisy; it’s the bedroom door that should be kept closed. What’s wrong with a little restraint?” asks Wallerstein. “You’re not lying, but you’re also not telling the kids, ‘Your father’s a jerk.’”

Phyllis Diamond, a clinical-social-work psychotherapist whose practice centers on divorce and remarriage, separated from her husband in 1976, when her son was four. Now remarried, with two stepchildren, she speaks to her clients with the voice of experience: “Successful divorcés are the ones who say, ‘Even if I’m angry, I’m not going to let it affect the parenting relationship.’”

Diamond notes that such respectful behavior has an interesting effect: The more civil the partners are toward each other, even if they’re just “acting” for the sake of their children, the more the anger dissipates. “Think of it as a business. In the early stages, it’s like having a business partner you don’t like. Keep it very structured, and when the hostility dies down, loosen up a bit. As you co-parent, trust and respect rebuilds, and you become more generous with time and money.”

**E**VEN IF PARENTS DON’T HAVE RESPECT for each other as spouses,” says Marla Isaacs, author of *The Difficult Divorce*, “co-parenting can work if they have a healthy respect for one another as parents.” When the ex-spouses have risen to maturity—that is, when they’ve learned to put their children’s needs first—they also stay on decent terms with their in-laws. Says Isaacs, “It’s a sign of adjustment and good psychological health when ex-spouses continue to see their in-laws for the sake of the children. It’s bad enough when the couple is fighting, but when whole families are fighting, forget it!”

In principle, couples who co-parent realize that they must accept their ex-spouses for the people they are, not the people they “should” be. That’s not always easy, of course. Anne Hamilton, who divorced Bob Latzen in 1985, when

their daughters were four and almost eight, still thinks her ex-husband is "rigid." But when her daughters complain about their father's inflexibility, she defends him: "That's the way he is." she says. "I tell them to look at it from his viewpoint. I think he does the same for me."

"Anne and I see things differently," Bob says. "I think school should be stressed more, and the kids should apply themselves to their fullest potential. I had a sterner upbringing." When their younger daughter, Ellen, got a part in a movie, he was opposed. "I used to see it as a turf issue. I fought very hard, initially, under the guise that 'it's not so good for Ellen.' But I realize now how much Ellen enjoys it—and success hasn't spoiled her—so I've mellowed on the subject."

He adds, "I'd like to think we've reached a point in our emotional maturity where we don't try to force each other. We may not agree, but at least we can always put our cards on the table."

**A SAVVY DIVISION OF PARENTING TIME**

**T**HE STUDIES CONFIRM what common sense suggests: Children of divorce need both their parents. In 90 percent of divorces, mothers have sole custody. Even when there's joint legal custody, with both parents having an equal say in decisions, children generally spend only about 30 percent of the time with their fathers. How visiting or living arrangements are set up depends on the child's age and each parent's physical and psychological availability.

"How you handle these things often boils down to being imaginative," says Judith Wallerstein, who is impressed with the creative solutions parents devise to help young children adjust. One mother, hearing that her preschooler became increasingly anxious in the afternoon, realized that he was worried about which parent would pick him up. So she began giving him a red lunch box on Daddy Days and a green one on Mommy Days.

Another challenge is to be sensitive to language. If you constantly call your home "my house," where is the child's house? It's better to refer to the location instead. For example, say "11th Street" and "Horatio Street," both of which are the child's homes, rather than "Mom's house" and "Dad's house."

Sandy Paulson\* and Robert Schoen\* tried to avoid that problem altogether when they first split up. For almost a year, the couple had a "bird's nest" arrangement: Eight-year-old Adam\* lived in the house all the time, and his parents rotated. Each had an outside apartment for the "off" days.

The agreement was fine until Robert started dating. "I found it distasteful to think of other women in the same bed," recalls Sandy. "I felt that his girlfriend shouldn't stay in the house." Robert sees it differently: "She became fearful that I would try to take Adam into a new family," he says. Within a year, Sandy moved into the house permanently and the ex-spouses had joint custody. Now Adam



**GAINING MATURITY**

**EX-SPOUSES MUST ACCEPT EACH OTHER FOR THE PEOPLE THEY ARE, NOT THE PEOPLE THEY 'SHOULD' BE.**

spends a week at a time at each parent's house.

**GETTING SUPPORT**

**P**EOPLE GOING THROUGH A SEPARATION or living in the aftermath of a divorce need sympathetic friends and support groups to turn to and, at times, therapists they can check in with. Most of the people interviewed for this article found therapy helpful.

But therapy is not the only route to recovery. Two years ago, after 25 years of marriage, Doris Thibault's\* husband, John\*, left her for a girl their daughter's age. For eighteen months after that shock, Doris was emotionally prostrate. "I'd never worked a day in my life," she says.

"But I had to start taking care of myself."

And she did. At first she got a few part-time clerical jobs; recently, to her delight, she landed a "great office job" as an administrative assistant. She has joined Parents Without Partners, a single-parents' group that "has given me the support I needed." To help defray her expenses, she's taken in as roommate a 29-year-old female cousin.

She also attended two classes on divorce and stress at a local hospital—classes that proved significant, for they put her own situation in perspective. "There are so many people who have it worse—they have small kids, drug and alcohol problems, no money," she says. "I'm young—47—and healthy." She walked away from those meetings feeling "lucky" and sure that whatever she had to do to make her life satisfying, she could do.

Telling her story today, Doris is amazingly understanding about what she calls her husband's "male menopause," and although she once hoped he'd "eventually come to his senses," she has accepted the breakup. She's glad her ex-husband has contact with their two children, now 25 and 22. "He cares very much about them. He helps them out, calls often."

Doris, whose daughter describes her as a "motivator," tells new PWP members, "In the beginning, some people are bitter. That passes. You have to do what's best for you and for your children. You need someone to talk to, someone whom you trust."

Like PWP, Kindred Spirits, a program of workshops and support groups for single parents and their children, sponsored by the 92nd Street Y, tends to attract people who have just split up and are hoping to establish a new social life. "The men who come here are often in crisis—they come to meet new people," says clinical social worker and psychotherapist Dawn Akins, the director. "Some of the women are in crisis, too, but they stick around the group longer because more of them have custody." And also, perhaps, because men tend to remarry faster—often within two or three years.

Though divorce leaves many women struggling to overcome financial dependency, most women are socially resourceful—and most men are not. "The same kinds of strengths and skills that help widows adjust to a spouse's death also help women after divorce," says Marla Isaacs. "Social dependency tends to be more of a man's

problem. People who've gone through a divorce fare better if they have friends of their own—not just mutual friends, not just married friends." Also, they're less likely to lean on their children for support.

**ANTICIPATING CHANGE**

**T**IME INEVITABLY USHERS IN change. Manhattan family therapist Ronald Taffel, director of family and couples treatment at the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy, advises divorced parents to "respect the power of the transitions of life—and begin to gear up for them before the day arrives." Is there a new school to be entered, a move or a graduation coming up? Make a yearly list, Taffel advises. "The ones who make lists learn to respect yellow lights, rather than wait for red ones."

Of course, the greatest transition is remarriage. If it's tricky to co-parent with an ex-spouse, arrangements can become Byzantine when you have an ex's new partner to deal with as well. Half-brothers and half-sisters and stepsiblings further complicate the picture. Joyce Wolfson\* and Steve Posner\* separated in 1979, when their son, Gabe\*, was two and a half. Although the pair had joint custody, Joyce left Chicago for Charleston, South Carolina. Steve made

bimonthly trips to Charleston to see his son, or Joyce took Gabe to Chicago. Steve took the boy during Christmas break and for two months each summer.

In 1983, the situation in both homes began to change: Steve remarried. A year later, so did Joyce. By 1987, Gabe had three young half-siblings. At the same time, an aunt to whom he was very close had two children; no longer the only grandson, Gabe chafed at the competition. Joyce says, "All I could do was tell him that it was okay to be angry, but he had to accept this reality."

Remarriage sometimes offers an unexpected resource: a cooperative stepparent—usually a stepmother, contrary to the wicked-stepmother myth, since many women believe it's their job to take care of the family. Some women who marry men with children grasp an important irony: If the husband continues to do battle with his ex-wife, he's still connected to her.

For several years after Elena Costas\* initiated a separation from Lee Walsh,\* she and a very bitter Lee battled over some of Elena's decisions about their children, Nicholas\* and Lanie\*, four and three when their parents separated. Lee recalls, "The main difficulty was the issue of control. My feeling was that you have to accommodate each other, but I was afraid that if I gave too much, I'd never see the kids." Elena says, "Lee got even

by not paying [his half of] the bills." Then along came Lee's new wife: "Dale\* just took over; she became the mediator," Elena explains. "That first time, she called me and said, 'He's going to meet you. He'll pay what he owes you—and tell you what's been bothering him.' It was the first time we had a productive conversation on these issues."

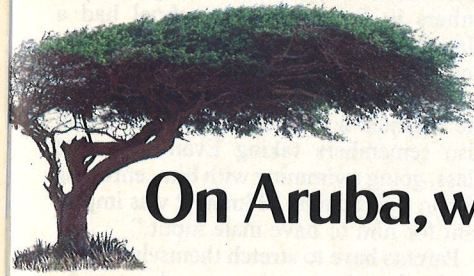
**STAYING IN TOUCH**

**A**FTER BOTH ELENA AND LEE REMARRIED, Nicholas—around ten at the time—began having problems in school. So the four adults went to a family therapist. That cooperation marked the second major change in Elena and Lee's post-divorce relationship. Says Lee, "It was like paradise for us all to be talking. Within two weeks, Nicholas was doing better."

Elena thinks it's because they developed an "executive parenting committee," and the children knew that whatever happened in one house would be carried out in the other: "It was the first time Nicholas realized he couldn't play one against the other. Lee and I talked about homework, punishment. If I said no TV, Lee'd enforce it."

"It's important that one parent tell the other what the child did in his house," stresses Ron Taffel. When couples are still

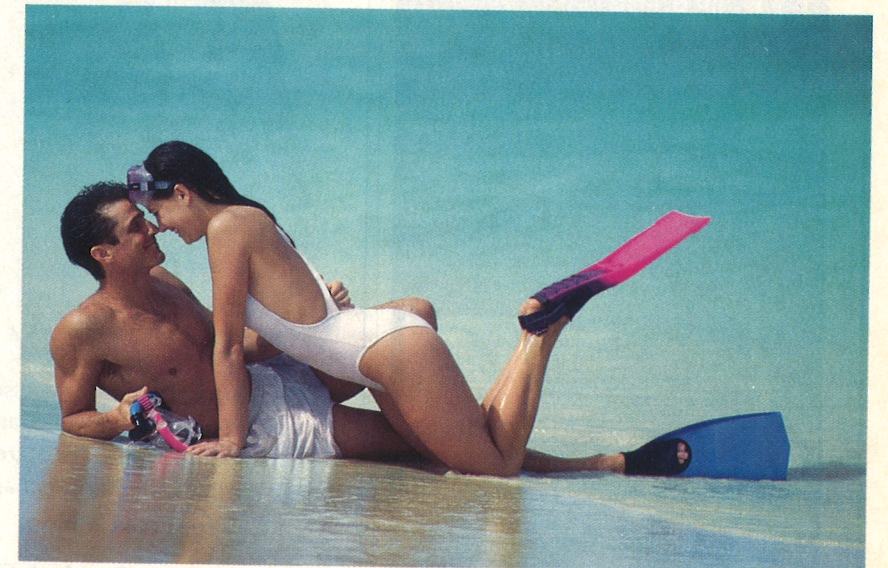
© 1990 Aruba Tourism Authority



**On Aruba, we do things a little bit differently..**

- On other islands, the trees grow straight up.
- On Aruba, they take another path.
- On other islands, the coins are round. Ours are square.
- On other islands, they still charge you for a rainy day.
- We have almost no rainy days.
- On other islands, your vacation is one of many businesses.
- On Aruba, it's our only business.
- Wouldn't you rather do things our way?

**ARUBA**  
Our only business is you.



For our brochure or more information, see your travel agent, or call 1-800-TO ARUBA. In New York, 212-246-3030.

too angry at each other to talk (even over the phone), Taffel tells them to "write notes to each other and have it delivered—of course, *not* by the kid. When children realize that both parents know what's up, they immediately settle down."

Taffel also advises parents not to talk to each other when the children are in earshot. "Talk when you're at work, because you have to be pretty sane there and because you're not in the environment where you once lived with that person."

### STEPPING OUT OF TRADITIONAL ROLES

**D**IVORCED COUPLES WHO MAKE THE most successful adjustment are those who aren't locked into "gender-specific roles," as Ron Taffel puts it. "Mothers with adolescent boys who think they need a man around for discipline or fathers who feel that nurturing isn't possible are going to have trouble. They have to widen their definition of what they think men and women can do. For example, a woman can learn to fix a bike or become knowledgeable about things that interest her son, like sports. A man can braid his daughter's hair or talk to her about her love life."

In the early years of their divorce, when Carl was not in Evan's life, Gail Connors says, "I definitely had to shift gears. The fathers in Evan's nursery school had a play group for their sons, and I was the only mother there. And I'd never have taken up skiing again if it weren't for him. He was just a toddler at the time." Gail also remembers taking Evan to karate class, going swimming with him, enrolling him in Cub Scouts: "I knew it was important for him to have male input."

Parents have to stretch themselves. One of the first times my ex was due to take the children overnight, he wondered whether it might not be better for Jeremy to stay at my apartment that night because he had a cold. As for me, it took me several years to come to terms with the fact that I had to earn my own living. In the long run, we've each developed new competencies—I have learned to fix things around the house; Mark has become a better cook. Not so incidentally, this gender blending also provides wonderful role models for the next generation.

### BELIEVING IT'S FOREVER

**I**F YOU'RE DIVORCED WITH CHILDREN, one of the great cosmic jokes is that you and your ex will always be in each other's lives. Ex-spouses who cooperate as parents share birthdays, graduations, confirmations; see school plays and basketball games and doctors and therapists together; hold powwows over curfews, allowances, vacation plans, music lessons,

homework schedules—the minutiae of family life.

Sandy Paulson still remembers camp visiting day in the summer of 1982, a year after her divorce. She and her then-fiancé, Kevin\*, had lunch with her son and her ex-husband. "I had to give Robert credit that he did it," she says. "But Kevin is extraordinary, too. He and I laughed about it: In the beginning, I did more talking with my ex-husband than I did with Kevin; Robert and I just had more business to discuss."

Although time heals deep wounds, and although being divorced gets easier as the children get older, co-parents are forever making Solomonic decisions over holidays and significant family celebrations. Unless one spouse wants to take the child away over a school vacation, holidays usually can be divided fairly—there's Christmas eve and Christmas day, for example. When no easy division can be made, many ex-spouses celebrate with the children every other year. But parents often feel lonely on their "off" year or afraid that the children will always prefer to spend holidays with "the other side." And when you factor in second marriages, stepchildren, and half-children, on some occasions the host may need an extra set of dishes—and name tags—for all of the new relatives.

There are no guidelines for life after divorce. One thing is certain: Divorced parents definitely have to work harder. And nothing is simple. Recently divorced Maxine Freedman\* is already dreading the prospect of her eleven-year-old son's bar mitzvah: "I guess if he gives me half the money, I'll have to invite his girlfriend," she says mournfully.

Leftover animosities in the extended family can also complicate milestone events, even though the exes themselves have reached a détente: Doris Thibault invited her ex-husband into her home for their daughter's bridal shower and a few months later to the wedding—even though both times, her family "wanted to kill him. They can't understand why I want to be friends."

After all the shouting's done, no one else has the same depth of feeling about a child as the other natural parent. Constance Ahrons was reminded of that recently when one of her daughters called to say her father—Ahrons's first husband—had been rushed to the hospital. "He was apparently okay, but I couldn't sleep that night. At first, I thought it was because I was worried for my daughters. Then I realized I was worried for *me*. I was scared I was going to lose him. We were divorced 25 years ago, but he *is* my partner in terms of those children."

Hearing Ahrons's story, I, too, had to admit: When it comes to my children, my ex-husband is still my partner. And whenever anything happens that concerns the children, their father is undoubtedly the first person I'll call . . . till death do us part. ■