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TIPS for Divorced Parents

One out of every two marriages today will end in divorce, but it doesn't always have to result in tragedy. True, divorce can be extremely messy—more so when children are involved. Children may become frightened and confused by the process and often have feelings of insecurity. Kids sometimes even blame themselves, mistakenly believing that they are the cause of their parents splitting up. It's important for parents to keep in mind that although divorce is difficult for Mom and Dad, it can be even harder for children if they get lost in the proceedings. With care and respect for everyone, a family can continue to be strong during a divorce if children are loved through the process.

Keep an eye on the kids.

Before, during, and after a divorce parents should be alert to the signs of distress in their children. Very young children can act out by becoming aggressive or uncooperative, withdrawing, or intentionally misbehaving. Older children may feel deep sadness and a sense of loss for one parent. If children show signs of distress, don't hesitate in getting help right away. Your family doctor is often the best place to get referrals for qualified psychological counselors.

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KIDS AND SOCIALIZING ONLINE

Social networking sites, chat rooms, virtual worlds, and blogs are how teens and tweens socialize online. It's important to help your child learn how to navigate these spaces safely. Among the pitfalls that come with online socializing are sharing too much information or posting comments, photos, or videos that can damage a reputation or hurt someone's feelings.

Applying real-world judgment can help minimize those risks.

Remind kids that online actions have consequences.

The words kids write and the images they post have consequences offline.

Kids should post only what they're comfortable with others seeing.

Some of your child's profile may be seen by a broader audience than you—or your child—may be comfortable with, even if privacy settings are high. Encourage your child to think about the language he or she uses online and to think before posting pictures and videos or altering photos posted by someone else. Employers, college admissions officers, coaches, teachers, and the police may view your child's posts.

Remind kids that once they post it, they can't take it back.

Even if you delete the information from a site, you have little control over older versions that may exist on other people's computers and may circulate online.

Tell your kids not to impersonate someone else.

Let your kids know that it's wrong to create sites, pages, or posts that seem to come from someone else, like a teacher, a classmate, or someone they made up.

Tell kids to limit what they share.

Help your kids understand what information should stay private.

Tell your kids why it's important to keep some things—about themselves, family members, and friends—to themselves. Information like their Social Security number, street address, phone number, and family financial information—say, bank account or credit card numbers—is private and should stay that way.

Talk to your teens about avoiding sex talk online.

Research shows that teens who don't talk about sex with strangers online are less likely to come in contact with predators.

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In fact, researchers have found that predators usually don't pose as children or teens, and most teens who are contacted by adults they don't know find it creepy. Teens should not hesitate to ignore or block them.

Encourage online manners.

Politeness counts.

You teach your kids to be polite offline; talk to them about being courteous online as well. Texting may seem fast and impersonal, yet courtesies like pls and ty (for please and thank you) are common text terms.

Tone it down.

Using all caps, long rows of exclamation points, or large, bolded fonts are the online equivalent of yelling. Most people don't appreciate a rant.

Cc: and *Reply All:* with care.

Suggest that your kids resist the temptation to send a message to everyone on their contact list.

Limit access to your kids' profiles.

Use privacy settings.

Many social networking sites and chat rooms have adjustable privacy settings, so you can restrict who has access to your kids' profiles. Talk to your kids about the importance of these settings and your expectations for who should be allowed to view their profile.

Set high privacy preferences on your kids' chat and video chat accounts as well. Most chat programs allow parents to control whether people on their kids' contact list can see their status, including whether they're online. Some chat and e-mail accounts allow parents to determine who can send messages to their kids and to block anyone not on the list.

Create a safe screen name.

Encourage your kids to think about the impression that screen names can make. A good screen name won't reveal much about how old they are, where they live, or their gender. For privacy purposes, your kids' screen names should not be the same as their e-mail addresses.

Review your child's friends list.

You may want to limit your children's online "friends" to people they actually know.

Talk to kids about what they're doing online.

Know what your kids are doing.

Get to know the social networking sites your kids use so you understand their activities. If you're concerned about risky online behavior, you may want to search the social sites they use to see what information they're posting. Are they pretending to be someone else? Try searching by their name, nickname, school, hobbies, grade, or community.

Ask your kids whom they're in touch with online.

Just as you want to know who your kids' friends are offline, it's a good idea to know whom they're talking to online.

Encourage your kids to trust their guts if they have suspicions.

Encourage them to tell you if they feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online. You can then help them report concerns to the police and to the social networking site. Most of these sites have links for users to report abusive, suspicious, or inappropriate behavior.

Federal Trade Commission (FTC), OnGuard Online. (2011, September). *Kids and socializing online*. Retrieved June 19, 2014, from http://www.onguardonline.gov/

LONG-DISTANCE CAREGIVING:
Getting Started

What does a long-distance caregiver do? How many other people are trying to help out from a distance?

If you live an hour or more away from a person who needs care, you can think of yourself as a long-distance caregiver. This kind of care can take many forms—from helping with finances or money management to arranging for in-home care; from providing respite care for a primary caregiver to creating a plan in case of emergencies. Many long-distance caregivers act as information coordinators, helping aging parents understand the confusing maze of new needs, including home health aides, insurance benefits and claims, and durable medical equipment.

Caregiving, no matter where the caregiver lives, is often long lasting and ever expanding. For the long-distance caregiver, what may start out as an occasional social phone call to share family news can eventually turn into regular phone calls about managing household bills, getting medical information, and arranging for grocery deliveries. What begins as a monthly trip to check on Mom may become a larger project to move her to a new home or nursing facility closer to where you live.

If you are a long-distance caregiver, you are definitely not alone. There may be as many as 7 million people in your same situation in the United States, according to the National Institute on Aging. In the past, caregivers have primarily been working women in midlife with other family responsibilities. That's changing. More and more men are getting involved; in fact, surveys show that men now represent almost 40% of caregivers. Anyone, anywhere can be a long-distance caregiver. Gender, income, age, social status, or employment should not prevent you from taking on at least some caregiving responsibilities and possibly feeling some of the satisfaction.

How will I know if help is needed? Uncle Simon sounds fine on the phone. How can I know that he really is?

Sometimes, your relative will ask for help. Or, the sudden start of a severe illness will make it clear that assistance is needed. But when you live far away, some detective work might be in order to uncover possible signs that support or help is needed.

A phone call is not always the best way to tell whether an older person needs help handling daily activities. Uncle Simon might not want to worry his nephew, Brad, who lives a few hours away, or he might not want to admit that he's often too tired to cook an entire meal. But how can Brad know this? If he calls at dinner and asks, "What's cooking?" Brad might get a sense that dinner is a bowl of cereal. If so, he might want to talk with his uncle and offer some help. With Simon's OK, Brad might contact people who see his uncle regularly—neighbors, friends, doctors, or local relatives, for example—and ask them to call Brad if they have concerns about Simon. Brad might also ask if he could check in with them periodically. When Brad spends a weekend with his uncle, he should look around for possible trouble areas; it's easier to disguise problems during a short phone call than during a longer visit.

Brad can make the most of his visit if he takes some time in advance to develop a list of possible problem areas he wants to check out while visiting his uncle. That's a good idea for anyone in this type of situation. Of course, it may not be possible to do everything in one trip, but make sure that any potentially dangerous situations are taken care of as soon as possible. If you can't correct everything on your list, see if you can arrange for someone else to finish up.

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LONG-DISTANCE CAREGIVING:
Getting Started

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In addition to safety issues and the overall condition of the house, try to determine the older person's mood and general health status. Sometimes people confuse depression in older people with normal aging. A depressed older person might brighten up for a phone call or short visit, but it's harder to hide serious mood problems during an extended visit

What can I really do from far away? My sister lives pretty close to our parents and has gradually been doing more and more for them. I'm halfway across the country. I'd like to help them and my sister, but I don't feel comfortable just jumping in.

Many long-distance caregivers provide emotional support and occasional respite to a primary caregiver. Staying in contact with your parents by phone or e-mail might also take some pressure off your sister. Long-distance caregivers can play a part in arranging for professional caregivers, hiring home health and nursing aides, or locating care in an assisted living facility or nursing home (also known as a skilled nursing facility). Some long-distance caregivers find they can be helpful by handling things online—for example, researching health problems or medicines, paying bills, or keeping family and friends updated. Some long-distance caregivers help a parent pay for care, while others step in to manage finances.

Caregiving is not easy for anyone, not for the caregiver and not for the care recipient. There are sacrifices and adjustments for everyone. When you don't live where the care is needed, it may be especially hard to feel that what you are doing is enough and that what you are doing is important. It often is.

How can my family decide who does what? My brother lives closest to our grandmother, but he's uncomfortable coordinating her medical care.

This is a question that many families have to work out. You could start by setting up a family meeting and, if your grandmother is capable, including her in the discussion. This is best done when there is not an emergency. A calm conversation about what kind of care is needed in the present and might be called for in the future can avoid a lot of confusion. Ask your grandmother what she wants. Use her wishes as the basis for a plan. Decide who will be responsible for which tasks. Many families find the best first step is to name a primary caregiver, even if one is not needed immediately. That way the primary caregiver can step in if there is a crisis.

Think about your schedules and how to adapt them to give respite to a primary caregiver or to coordinate holiday and vacation times. One family found that it worked to have the long-distance caregiver come to town while the primary caregiver was on a family vacation. Many families report that offering appreciation, reassurance, and positive feedback to the primary caregiver is an important but sometimes forgotten contribution.

What is a geriatric care manager, and how can I find one? A friend of mine thought that having a professional "on the scene" to help my dad would take some of the pressure off me.

Professional geriatric care managers are usually licensed nurses or social workers who specialize in geriatrics. Some families hire a geriatric care manager to evaluate and assess a parent's needs and to coordinate care through community resources. The cost of an initial evaluation varies and may be expensive, but depending on your family circumstances, geriatric care managers might offer a useful service. They are a sort of professional relative to help you and your family identify needs and how to meet them. These professionals can also help by leading family discussions about sensitive subjects. For example, Alice's father might be more willing to take advice from someone outside the family.

The National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers, www.caremanager.org, can help you find a care manager near your family member's community. In some cases, support groups for diseases related to aging may be able to recommend geriatric care managers who have assisted other families.

National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Aging. (Updated 2014, March 24). *So far away: Twenty questions and answers about long-distance caregiving.* Retrieved November 21, 2014, from http://www.nia.nih.gov/.

THANKSGIVING SAFETY

The kitchen is the heart of the home, especially at Thanksgiving. Kids love to be involved in holiday preparations. Safety in the kitchen is important, especially on Thanksgiving Day when there is a lot of activity and people at home. These tips from the National Fire Protection Association will help make sure you have a fire-safe holiday.

SAFETY TIPS

- Stay in the kitchen when you are cooking on the stovetop so you can keep an eye on the food.
- Stay in the home when cooking your turkey, and check on it frequently.
- Keep children away from the stove. The stove will be hot, and kids should stay 3 feet away.
- Make sure kids stay away from hot food and liquids. The steam or splash from vegetables, gravy, or coffee could cause serious burns.
- Keep the floor clear so you don't trip over kids, toys, pocketbooks, or bags.
- Keep knives out of the reach of children.
- Be sure electric cords from an electric knife, coffeemaker, plate warmer, or mixer are not dangling off the counter within easy reach of a child.
- Keep matches and utility lighters out of the reach of children—up high in a locked cabinet.
- Never leave children alone in a room with a lit candle.
- Make sure your smoke alarms are working. Test them by pushing the test button.

National Fire Protection Association. (n.d.) *Thanksgiving safety.* Retrieved March 24, 2015, from www.nfpa.org/cooking

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Children need parents.

Children do best when they are secure in the fact that even after divorce, Mom and Dad will still be Mom and Dad. Although parents won't live together, parental roles should remain the same when it comes to the children, and parenting should still be done as a team. Be prepared for the fact that children will sometimes feel like they need to pick sides. Reassure your children that they do not have to choose one parent over the other.

Minimize change.

Although your divorce will create many changes for you and your children, continuity is important. Even if the home is a new one, make your children's environment as familiar as possible by incorporating favorite treasures, toys, photographs, blankets, etc. Create a real home in each place children stay. Make sure each child has his or her own "space," even if it's not an entire room.

Talk about feelings.

Ask your children how they are feeling during the divorce and what they think or imagine will happen. Help your children express their feelings through frequent discussions. Above all, make sure they understand they are not to blame in the situation and that they know they are loved.

Respect the other parent.

When talking to your children about your former spouse, talk with respect, and praise whatever can be praised. Encourage family meetings where you discuss how your children can find the good, special things about being with each parent. And when you and your ex are together, remember to fight fair—away from your children! Divorce is an intense, stressful time of readjustment for everyone, but do your best to plan a time and place nowhere near the kids to discuss and resolve conflicts.

Remember to be the grown-up.

Avoid asking your children for advice on money, your partnership, custody, or court issues. Reassure your children that decisions are made for their best interest. Also be aware that as you guide and support your children during a divorce, you'll need help too. Don't be afraid to ask for emotional support from family and friends or to reach out to counselors. But whatever you do, don't let your children turn into your psychological support system or become your parents.

Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2015). *Tips for divorced parents*. Raleigh, NC: Author.