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COLUMNS

THE MINDFULL DIVORCÉE

Debbie Martinez, Divorce Coach



Divorcing with a Special Needs Child

THE OTHER DAY I RECEIVED A CALL FROM A WOMAN WHO WANTED ME TO review her parenting plan. After looking it over I thought it seemed fine, until she told me her child had special needs. At that point, it went out the window. If you are going through a divorce and you have a special needs child here are some things that are imperative when you are drafting the parenting plan.

1. Work on the plan with someone who has knowledge of special needs children.
2. If you are just starting the divorce process, hire an attorney that has experience with special needs.
3. If needed, get a guardian ad litem to advocate for the child.
4. If it applies, have special wording in the agreement pertaining to extending child support as long as the child is in school and not ending at age 18.
5. Be clear in what will be the financial responsibility of both parents after the age of 18.
6. When discussing parenting time, be mindful of the child's needs and not yours. If transitioning causes increased anxiety, don't have the child going back and forth three times per week.
7. If you are concerned that there will be potential problems co-parenting with your ex, request that it be written into the parenting plan that a certain number of co-parenting sessions are required with a co-parenting coach. This will ensure you are doing what is best for your child.



The parenting plan is just one aspect of the overall plan for your child as he/she moves forward during and after divorce. Here is a list of things you can do outside of the legal aspect to help your child adjust.

- » Use a picture book about divorce to guide discussion.
- » Seek the assistance of a therapist if needed.
- » If working with incentives, keep them the same in each household.
- » Keep household rules the same.
- » Keep caregivers the same.
- » Monitor your child's frustration level.
- » Equip both homes with a set of books and school supplies.
- » Encourage extracurricular activities.
- » Have a visual visitation calendar in the child's room that shows with pictures the days the child will be with Mom and Dad.
- » Meet with the school counselor and teachers to notify them of the divorce.
- » Discuss the possibility of having a "social buddy" or aide.
- » Review the classroom set up to insure child is sitting in the best possible place to feel secure.

Another aspect of all this is to make sure you carve out time for yourself. Divorce is a very difficult time and is only compounded by the extra help and planning a special needs child will require. Even if you think you don't have time or that you are being selfish by taking the time, do it!! Your child needs you to be at your best and you won't be unless you take care of yourself first. Kind of like the oxygen mask on the plane. List the things that relax you, bring you joy or are stress relievers and make sure you do one thing a few times a week. Trust me, it will pay off in the end.

Debbie Martinez, MA is a certified, mindful life coach specializing in divorce (aka: heartbreak coach). She professionally coaches clients on how to avoid the breakup backlash and live better, not bitter. As a Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Mediator trained in collaborative divorce, Debbie gives clients the tools they need to successfully untie the knot and stand strong in the wake of adversity. She brings her formal training and life experience into her coaching practice to empower and educate clients through their divorce journey and onto new beginnings. You can contact Debbie at debbie@transformationthrudivorce.com.