

42TM
Rules
**for Divorcing
with Children**

Doing It with Dignity & Grace While
Raising Happy, Healthy, Well-
Adjusted Children

MELINDA ROBERTS

FOREWORD BY HEATHER ARMSTRONG



**“42 Rules for
Divorcing with
Children”
Book Excerpt**

Doing It with Dignity & Grace
While Raising Happy, Healthy,
Well-Adjusted Children

By Melinda Roberts
Foreword by Heather Armstrong



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Foreword by Heather Armstrong

I was ten years old when my mother and father told me and my siblings that they were getting divorced. We sat around the kitchen table, and I remember the sound of my legs squeaking against the yellow vinyl of the dining chair when I took my place. I thought that if I could crawl up inside that noise, then I wouldn't be able to hear what I knew they were about to tell me, news that had been years in the making.

Those years were miserable for everyone in our home. My brother and I used to hide in the dark of my room on the far side of my bed and listen to my parents yell at each other. Eventually those arguments became so scary that my sister, my brother, and I sought refuge outside the home. My sister turned to her boyfriend while my brother and I turned to our best friends.

Christy was my next-door neighbor, and I shared her twin bed during sleepovers that happened almost every night of the week, even during the school year. Sometimes we'd play in her backyard before her parents fed me dinner, and we'd hear my own parents yelling in their bedroom about fifty feet away. Christy and I never spoke of it. In fact, she'd always tug me inside when she saw me stop to try to make out what they were saying.

Whenever I did sleep at home, I'd find my mother in tears every morning, a zombie, a vacant shell. I'd watch her wash her face in the bathroom sink and beg her to tell me what was wrong.

"Nothing," she'd answer, always. Not once did she elaborate.

But I knew better, kids always do, and so I decided that I was going to fix things. If I made good grades, she'd be happy. If I excelled at everything I tried, she'd be happy. If I vacuumed the house in perfect lines, she'd be happy. And if my mother could just be happy, then the fighting would stop. Surely this would work.

I was the child who took my parents' divorce the hardest. Yes, I was the youngest, and my brother and sister could process that split with more maturity than I could. But the truth is that I thought I had failed everyone. I had tried to fix it, and it broke anyway. All that furious work I had done, and the family still fell apart.

I wish my parents had had this book when they were going through all that pain. I wish my father had stopped himself from turning to me, from rocking me back and forth in his lap and asking in my ear why my mother wouldn't come back to him.

I like to think that I learned from my parents' mistakes, because it's been over eight months since I separated from my children's father, and not once have they witnessed an argument. That's not something to brag about, no. I mean, it should be this way by default, right? But now that I'm going through this pain myself I can forgive my parents more than just a little bit. Emotions run high and wild. When my idea of fair gets trampled on or the resentment boils and overflows, it's hard to resist screaming at a wall IN FRONT OF EVERYONE.

I have not been perfect during this time, not even close, but before we decided to separate we made it clear to each other that the kids would always come first. Because of what I had gone through when I was ten, I had a working blueprint. We'd honor their routine and their feelings and their confusion. We'd communicate with them often and openly, never speaking ill of each other. They'd never have to ask us repeatedly what was wrong, and neither of us would whisper one word into their ears about our own pain. They'd never have to seek refuge with someone else because being around us was too unbearable.

I feel very lucky that I have this book while I'm right in the middle of everything, because while I know many of the mistakes to avoid because of my own parents, there was a lot I was surprised to learn. I reread the sections on finances, resentment, and grief multiple times. Also, I am terrible when it comes to asking for help, and this is the most overwhelming situation I've ever been in. I have walked right up to the brink of an emotional breakdown once or twice in the last few months, and it's nice to be reminded of the reasons why I can and should step away for a while.

Also, when the homework and assignments start flying like gunfire, I will wear out the pages that detail how to transfer children between houses (I've already dog-eared that section).

This book helped me fill in many of the blanks, and I know I will reference it often in the coming months. If you have found yourself wondering how on earth to honor your children during this gut-wrenching time, or if you have no idea where to start, consider this your blueprint. Turn to these rules when you are feeling weak. Most importantly, let it help you feel a little less alone.

HEATHER ARMSTRONG
<http://www.dooce.com/>

Heather Armstrong, a former Web designer, started publishing dooce(r) in early 2001. Heather has won numerous awards for her work on dooce.com including Best American Blog, Best Designed Blog, Best Writing for a Blog, and Weblog of the Year, and in 2008, she received a Lifetime Achievement award. In addition, Heather was named #8 in Forbes's "The Web Celeb 25" in 2008 and 2009. Heather has been profiled in The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, Forbes, and Businessweek, amongst others. Heather has appeared on ABC's Nightline, NPR, PBS, ABC World News Tonight, and NBC's The Today Show. The blog dooce is one of the most widely read personal sites on the Internet and has a passionately loyal following. She is the

author of the bestselling book It Sucked and
Then I Cried: How I Had a Baby, a Breakdown,
and a Much Needed Margarita.

Divorcing with Dignity and Grace

In 2004, my husband and I decided to get a divorce after eleven years of marriage, years that gave us hope; heartbreak; and three beautiful, happy children.

There's no easy way to divorce with children; you have to learn by doing. You can start by putting their confused, fragile hearts and minds first, and doing your best to build a new life for all of you without destroying one another in the process. You don't have to like your ex (or "OP" as we shall be calling the Other Parent in this book*). However, you must try, for the sake of the children, to treat the OP exactly how you hope the OP will treat you. This is critical for your children to have any chance for a future that includes a loving, healthy, adult relationship of their own. Your children have not fully individuated yet, and they can't help feeling that if either parent is perceived as bad, then *part of them must be bad*. They will internalize whatever you project toward the OP, so project your best side.

Now that my own children are seven-year divorce veterans, I asked them what advice they'd give to other parents, hoping that they would tell me what went right and what went wrong in our own experience. My fourteen-year-old son shrugged. In response, my eleven-year-old son said, "My advice is that parents shouldn't ask their kids to do their writing for them." My ten-year-old daughter said, "When you tell your kids you're getting divorced, hand them cupcakes first."

Our children have repeatedly told the OP and me how much they appreciate the way we've handled things. They like that we try to get along and that we all get together often, celebrating birthdays and holidays together. If we can't do

the whole day, they try to wake up at one house and sleep at the other. We both promised that we would never, ever love them less or hate the other parent, because how could you hate the only other person who loves them as much as you do? (My condolences to those who are living another reality; I totally get it, and my heart goes out to you. It takes two to tango, and some people can't even find the dance floor.)

Granted, our shared life in divorce is possible because we live in the same county, we like each other a lot more now that we're no longer married, and we both want the children to have as intact a family experience as possible given the circumstances. Unfortunately, this is not possible for a lot of folks.

Try to have a divorce characterized by dignity and grace, at least with regards to the children. In seclusion, feel free to practice your archery with the OP's photograph. I don't care what you do to get that anger out; just don't let the kids witness it. They didn't ask for this, and they cannot begin to fathom what comes next.

You can make it easier on yourself and on them. Come on, I'll give you 42 rules to follow.

*For purposes of clarity, I'll define a few terms for this book. The chances of everyone having the same players and relationships are slim and emaciated, so I'll be as broad and inclusive as possible (hint: this a recurring theme).

OP: Other Parent. I've tried and discarded ex or DH (short for "dear husband"¹). The Other Parent may not yet be an ex or especially dear at the moment, so we'll go with the undisputable and maximally neutral "Other Parent." So, OP it is.

Children/Kids: I'm not fond of using an acronym for children for this book. We are talking about children collectively. In short, I will use the terms "children" and "kids."

1. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=dh>

2

Curb Your Resentment

Resentment is corrosive, debilitating, and completely counter-productive.

Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

—Malachy McCourt

Malachy McCourt was spot-on. Resentment is corrosive, debilitating, and completely counter-productive.

Everyone is entitled to wallow, as that is between you and your conscience, and perhaps anyone who chooses to be around you while you do it. Wallow away. Everyone needs to indulge those feelings, acknowledge them, heal, and move on. You can always circle back; in fact, I recommend that you do, and that you bring ice cream and movies.

Resentment is completely different. Resentment is something that you think is between you and another person, something you think is felt by that person through sheer force of will and laser-focused rage. The truth is, they aren't participants. They can't feel it, may not be aware of it, would not attach the same value to it as you do, and might even dismiss it entirely. You wear resentment like you wear your skin: it is subjective, intensely personal, always there, and always vulnerable and sensitive, and others haven't the faintest clue how you feel encased in it.

Shed it. Get help! Don't feed your resentment; rather, try to learn how to let it go.

You have a long road ahead, one that disappears into the horizon, circles the globe, and is right there behind you when you look over your shoulder. If you do this right, you will be walking this road indefinitely, and you'll want to travel

light. Do you really want to give piggyback rides to real or imagined slights, indignation, and your own personal life-disaster gag reel on permanent loop? No one else is watching it, and you are giving rent-free space in your brain to someone from whom you've already decided to separate.

Worse, that person is dragging around his or her own blooper reel of things that he or she may regret or resent, so the person isn't even suffering along with you. You are suffering in parallel. I bet you never considered that. It's because resentment is intensely personal and cannot be forced upon another in any meaningful way. You can't (and shouldn't) expect anyone else to feel and see and think as you do, so any energy you spend on resentment is wasted on the OP and bad for your own well being.

I don't pretend to know the best way to shed resentment; I find myself tipping over into it periodically, but it happens less frequently as time goes by and acceptance sets in. With that comes a feeling of freedom, and—wait for it—hope! You no longer have to factor that other person into your formula for personal fulfillment. Anything you do from now on is a product of your ability and willingness to let go, look ahead, and realize that you will never have power over how another person thinks or behaves. In fact, what another person thinks is none of your concern or business! Remember the golden rule about treating others the way you'd like to be treated, NO MATTER WHAT. That applies even if you are 100 percent right and the OP is 300 percent wrong.

You and you alone have power over your own thoughts and behavior, and you have an opportunity to start fresh with new habits that don't include spending any more time launching unhealthy thought missiles at an unappreciative and probably oblivious audience.

8

Decide How, When, and Where to Break the News

Emphasize that you will be a better team in two houses.

We told our children during snuggle time in bed, when everyone was feeling safe and close. We didn't want a formal, nerve-racking meeting where everyone sat with hands folded in laps. Fortunately, we had slowly prepared, after the OP found a job and another place; he had been a stay-at-home dad for four years, so we waited to break the news until he could support a separate household.

The kids were upset: the eldest (7) inconsolable, the middle child (4 ½) quiet, the youngest (3) not really getting it. We emphasized that we would always be a family but that they would spend part of each week at mom's, part at dad's.

We were lucky that we could cooperate about how to break the news, focusing on the love, in a safe space. Not everyone will have that luxury. If you have any control over how, when, and where you tell the children, choose to do it lovingly, and—if possible—with dignity and a united front. Practice if you can, because it will be awkward as all get-out and—bet you dollars to donuts—one of you will blurt out something inappropriate. The most important thing perhaps is that you both show love during the conversation. Hold your nose if you have to; this is not about you.

- Plan ahead. Agree on what to say and not to say. It's not helpful for one parent to say it's temporary and the other to say it's permanent.

- Emphasize that it's because of discord between the parents, NOT because of anything the children did, said, felt, or dreamed. Let them know that together you considered every possible alternative. Do not dive into the swamp of real reasons.
- The children will argue. Given the choice between a happy parent in another household or an unhappy one under the same roof, nine times out of ten they will prefer you crying in the next room. This is not about giving them what they want, but about what will enable the family to function better. The kids will suggest that you just go to your rooms and later hug and apologize and decide together what channel to watch, like they have to do.
- Emphasize that you will be a better team apart. Sometimes it's just not possible for two people to live together and be happy, or safe, or kind. Giving each parent some space away from constant friction will help everyone to act better towards one another. You can't be irritated at the state of the house if you are the only one running it.
- Listen to the children. The decision isn't open for discussion, but feelings, fears, and logistics are. It will take time to get through their concerns; don't cut the talk short.
- If possible, touch each other while talking. This was important to our kids. They wanted to keep touching both of us, and years later they still try to draw us into group hugs. Put aside your aversion and give this small gift to your children. Soon enough they will have only separate memories with each of you.

Everyone will suffer. I have only heard of one instance where the children said, "Well, we wondered how long it would take you to realize you shouldn't be married." Chances are that your children won't be that perceptive or have that perspective. Go easy on yourselves; there is no painless way to do this. Everyone will cry.

But! You can take comfort that a better life is coming. You'll develop your own ways to pay bills, fold the laundry, park the car, load the dishwasher, and clean the bathroom. This is not trivial stuff; it's amazing how free and hopeful you can feel about making these choices alone. Knowing you can keep the doors closed in summer and fold your shirts in thirds instead of halves—man, it's the bomb.

12

**Work from Big to Small,
but Don't Ignore the Small**

***You also
have to work
out custody
for the Easter
Bunny and
Santa Claus.***

Take a deep breath. Your kids are scared and need you to help them make sense of how life will change in big and small ways, even if you can't make sense of it yourself.

Big Things for You:

- Housing. Where is everyone going to live? How much will it cost to run two households?
- Custody. Who will stay where and when?
- Schools. Will anything change?
- Transportation. Do you each have a vehicle that will carry all the children plus a parent? If you have a sports car, say goodbye.

Big Things for Your Children:

- Friends. Will I be able to have them over to each house? Will they still like me?
- Bedrooms. Will I have to share a room? Will I still be able to share a room? My kids each got their own room, but sometimes they are lonely, so we have a lot of sibling sleepovers.
- Toys and Games. Can we get a Wii for each house? A bike? Where will my baseball equipment live?
- Pets. Will Fido move around with us? No? Who will take care of him when we are gone and make sure he has his squeaky?
- Clothes and Stuff. If I forget something, will you ferry us back and forth until we get the hang of this new arrangement?

I don't even want to get into homework, a Big Thing for EVERYONE. In the six years since the OP and I divorced, we still struggle with this.

Textbooks are left under beds, reports started at one house don't get to the other house to finish, we bookmark websites on mom's computer but can't remember how to find them on dad's. We spend a lot of time scanning, emailing, and ferrying parts of books and papers between houses. Try asking teachers for a second textbook. It beats constantly hearing, "I left it at the other house, can I turn it in later?"

Very, Very Small Sampling of the Small Things:

- Shoes. What? You came here barefoot and don't have shoes to wear?
- Uniforms. Buy two of everything. Yes, it's expensive. So is anger management therapy.
- Cell Phones and Paraphernalia. Keeping track is maddening.
- Notices from School. ARGH. Weekly envelopes go home on Wednesdays. Guess who doesn't have custody on Wednesdays? Never knowing what is going on drives me up a wall.
- Teeth. If a child loses a tooth at one house but sleeps at the other, where does the Tooth Fairy leave that freaking dollar? You also have to work out custody for the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus.

Have "Mirror Houses" if you can. Anything you can do to ease the transition into two households will help the kids (and you!) cope. For instance, I went out and purchased the same sheets, comforters, quilts, pillows, and drapes. The OP bought the furniture, and I provided the familiarity. It looked familiar, felt familiar, and eventually smelled familiar. INVEST IN THE FAMILIAR!

It gets easier, and you will tap into powers of organization you never thought you possessed. You will learn to be an administrative team or go crazy. Separate the administrative bits of parenting from the interpersonal relationship you've had with your OP. You don't have to share a bed, but you have to share schedules. You don't have to talk about your feelings, but you have to talk about the children's needs, responsibilities, and feelings. It's easier to concentrate on issues concerning the children than on those you occasionally wade into between you and the OP. Repeat after me: you are a better team in two houses.

20

Keep It Off Facebook!

Anything you say can (and probably will) be used against you in a court of law.

Facebook, email, texts, and recorded voice mails are loaded material. Once they are out, you cannot take them back. If you don't want any of it used against you, don't publish it!

It's also rude and bad etiquette to disrespect an ex-partner on social media. You will regret it, either when you cool down or when you face up to it in a legal skirmish.

Plus? It can be part of the discovery process! As Richard Adams warns in "Facebook a top cause of relationship trouble, say US lawyers" (<http://bit.ly/gvJLtj>):⁴

Even though the rate of divorce in the US has remained largely stable in recent years, American divorce lawyers and academics [are] picking out Facebook as a leading cause of relationship trouble, with American lawyers now demanding to see their clients' Facebook pages as a matter of course before the start of proceedings.

"...One spouse connects online with someone they knew from school. The person is emotionally available and they start communicating through Facebook," said Dr. Steven Kimmons, a clinical psychologist and marriage counselor at Loyola University Medical Centre near Chicago... A 2010 survey by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) found that four out of five lawyers reported an increasing

4. www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/mar/08/facebook-us-divorces

number of divorce cases citing evidence derived from social networking sites in the past five years, with Facebook being the market leader...

Photographs harvested from social networking sites... are a particularly rich source of damning evidence, according to divorce lawyers.

Both my husband and I have blocked his OP from our Facebook profiles and adjusted our privacy settings. We haven't done the same for my OP because we are all friends. We are kind to one another online, share funny stories, and are "friends" with each other's parents. You have to be absolutely sure you can stay on the high road or lock down all your privacy settings. I am SO not kidding.

It gets scarier. Get a load of this article by Leanne Italie from MSNBC: "Facebook is divorce lawyers' new best friend."⁵ WHAT? Argh!

Forgot to de-friend your wife on Facebook while posting vacation shots of your mistress?

Her divorce lawyer will be thrilled.

Oversharing on social networks has led to an overabundance of evidence in divorce cases. The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers says 81 percent of its members have used or faced evidence plucked from Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and other social networking sites, including YouTube and LinkedIn, over the last five years...

- Husband goes on Match.com and declares his single, childless status while seeking primary custody of said nonexistent children.
- Husband denies anger management issues but posts on Facebook in his "write something about yourself" section: "If you have the balls to get in my face, I'll kick your ass into submission."
- Father seeks custody of the kids, claiming (among other things) that his ex-wife never attends the events of their young ones. Subpoenaed evidence from the gaming site World of Warcraft tracks her there with her boyfriend at the precise time she was supposed to be out with the children. Mom loves Facebook's Farmville, too, at all the wrong times.
- Mom denies in court that she smokes marijuana but posts partying, pot-smoking photos of herself on Facebook.

"... You're finding information that you just never get in the normal discovery process—ever," Leslie Matthews said. "People are just blabbing things all over Facebook. People don't yet quite connect what they're saying in their divorce cases is completely different from what they're saying on Facebook. It doesn't even occur to them that they'd be found out..."

If you aren't scared straight by now, you aren't paying close enough attention.

5. <http://nbcnews.to/NrLQ20>
www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37986320/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/t/facebook-divorce-lawyers-new-best-friend/#.T_iTvXDzf9Qx

About the Author



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Melinda Roberts is a pioneer in the blogging community, founding The Mommy Blog in 2002. Witty, sarcastic, and engaging, her writing has been described as a cross between Erma Bombeck, Nora Ephron, and Helen Fielding. Melinda has appeared on Oprah, CNN, ABC, Fox, CBS and other fancy media outlets. Her first book, *Mommy Confidential: Adventures from the Wonderbelly of Motherhood* was nominated for The Blooker Prize in 2006.

Newly remarried, Melinda and her husband live with their six children in the Bay Area.

You can find her online at:
<http://themommyblog.com> and
<http://melindaroberts.net>.

Getting “42 Rules for Divorcing with Children”
(<http://happyabout.com/42rules/divorcingwithchildren.php>)

42 Rules for Divorcing with Children can be purchased as an eBook for \$14.95 or tradebook for \$19.95 at:

<http://happyabout.com/42rules/divorcingwithchildren.php> or at other online and physical book stores.

Please contact us for quantity discounts sales@happyabout.info or to be informed about upcoming titles bookupdate@happyabout.info or phone (408-257-3000)

"In her compulsively readable book, Mindy Roberts deconstructs the myth that couples with children can truly get divorced and provides practical tips for reconfiguring post-divorce families. Every divorcing couple, or any couple contemplating divorce, should read this book."

Virginia Gilbert, MA, MFT, Specializing in High-Conflict Divorce, and HuffPost Divorce Blogger (<http://www.viriniagilbertmft.com>)

"Melinda Roberts addresses some of the most significant issues divorcing parents face. This is a smart guide that I recommend to any parents who want to avoid the heartbreaking mistakes too often made when divorce divides a family!"

Rosalind Sedacca, Founder, Child-Centered Divorce Network (<http://www.childcenterreddivorce.com>)

"Mindy Roberts's book is a must read for anyone with children who is in the initial stages of a separation, currently separated, or divorced, or engaged in high-conflict co-parenting. You are not alone, and keeping this handy book beside you will help you—no matter how hopeless you might think things may be!"

Diane Holcombe, RN, Life and Wellness Coach Supporting You Through Transitions (<http://www.clarifyyou.com>)



MELINDA ROBERTS

a pioneer in the blogosphere, founder of The Mommy Blog, and author of Mommy Confidential: Adventures from the Wonderbelly of Motherhood, is a leading spokesperson for the mommy blogging community.

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