

Facing Divorce with a Special Needs Child

by Kristyn Crow

There is no question that having a child with a disability is a tremendous source of stress for any couple. What was once a carefree romantic relationship turns into a painful, confusing, emotional rollercoaster, at least for a time. Sometimes one partner decides he or she wants off the ride. And this leaves a tremendous burden on the spouse left behind.

1. **If there is any way to salvage your marriage, SALVAGE it.** Your child has enough chaos and adversity already, without having the added confusion of trading parents back and forth, or losing one parent entirely. Imagine the frustration for a child who relies on consistency, like an autistic child, to suddenly have to switch environments every few days. Not a secure situation. Your child, especially a special needs child, will benefit greatly from your marriage enduring

2. **You cannot do this without help.** You've got to find family members, friends, counselors, social workers, neighbors, people who attend your church, or anyone else available to you for support. If contacting people seems overwhelming, get your closest friend or family member to start the process. Contact that individual and say, "I need your help. This is what I need..." and be clear. Ask this person to make some calls for you.

3. As hurt and heartbroken as you may feel, **do not purposely limit your child's contact with the other parent.** Unless there is addiction, abuse, or an unsafe situation, your child needs frequent contact with his other parent, for his own emotional well-being. It's incredibly painful to drop off your son or daughter with your former spouse. I know this all too well. But you will have to be strong for the sake of your child. For the first several weeks, I set-up visits with my friends each time my boys went with their father. It helped knowing I would not be alone.

4. **Immediately make this chaotic time as structured as possible for your child.** Set-up specific, reliable visitation dates. Keep drop off points at the same place each time. Create a routine. Provide a comfort object for your child to take with him on all visits. Make your child a calendar with the visitation schedule clearly marked, and let her cross off each day, so she can predict her visitations in advance.

5. **Do not argue in front of your child.** Do whatever you can to keep his life peaceful and as uncomplicated as possible. If necessary, get a mutual friend or acquaintance to accompany you to visitation drop offs, to limit any hostilities.

6. **Have faith, courage, and hope.** Trust me; I could not have imagined a worse scenario for my life. It seemed like all was lost. But life has a tendency to eventually turn the tables. You just have to be patient, and keep doing what's right. Focus on your child, but also nurture yourself. I've found that karma, fate, or destiny (whatever you choose to call it) will eventually reward these efforts.

