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Alison O'Mahony runs an organisation called Be StepWise, which helps support step families. She has found that step families can have hidden difficulties that need special attention, and if parents split up acrimoniously in previous relationships it can take some time for children to adjust.

Here Alison talks about the importance of using mediation or other non-adversarial routes to resolve conflicts in a divorce or separation - especially where there are children involved.

At Be StepWise we find that families who use mediation to negotiate their divorce have much better outcomes than those who follow the more acrimonious court route. After an acrimonious divorce, children are much more likely to have been drawn into disputes, even if this is inadvertent or unintentional. Misunderstandings abound. Depending on the child's age and the family's circumstances this can mean damaging consequences. Unfortunately these consequences can affect a whole lifetime.

In particular we find divorces that turn ugly can badly affect how well a family functions as a unit in the future. It can affect the format of subsequent step-families as the children involved can feel torn or disloyal. It can also affect the child's prospects of forming and sustaining long-term relationships and families for themselves.

Although we do not offer a mediation service ourselves - we make sure we refer clients to see a quality-assured mediator or any other dispute resolution service that would benefit them.

It is usual for children to want their parents to stay together. If this is not possible then the next best thing is for parents to continue to be actively involved in parenting them. For the longer-term well-being of the child, it is much better for divorcing parents to remain in communication with each other, on speaking terms, and even on good terms if possible, and mediation can help achieve this where resolving the issues in court can be more confrontational.

For emotional well-being through to adulthood people need to be able to make sense of their lives and understand how and why they are who they are.

If parents communicate it is much more likely that their child won't be put in awkward situations, for example that they won't be delivering messages from one parent to the other, or is free from the burden of keeping secrets from their mother or father. The child can then enjoy the self-esteem that comes from knowing both parents and from freely identifying with both of them.

Being a step-parent is challenging; it often means doing things differently from normal parenting and that this is much more difficult after a contested divorce or separation. It is important for children to experience security and understanding as they grow up. Working things out together as a new family is

only possible if the children and adults are emotionally open. Step-mothers and step-fathers can become an additional source of support for young people as they grow up. In our experience, if the divorcing or separating couple use mediation a good outcome is more likely for them, their children and any new partners.

[Be Stepwise](#) offer support and counselling to step families and step parents. For more information on mediation and how to find a mediator please go to the [Direct Gov](#) pages.