

Challenges of Coronavirus for Divorced and Blended Families

By

Sheltering in place during the pandemic is difficult when you're living, working and schooling in the same location with your family. Add in the complexities of divorce, blended families and economic uncertainty, and the pressure goes up further. Some experts predict there will be a rise in divorce when the pandemic ends.

Carlos Lastra, co-chair of our Family Law practice, says the coronavirus is wreaking havoc on divorced and blended families. Here is a Q&A on the challenges of COVID-19 on divorced and blended families and what couples can do to co-exist. He recently appeared on *Great Day Washington* discussing this very topic.

Q: What makes coronavirus pandemic so challenging for divorced and blended families?

A: This is a **difficult and unprecedented time**, it's extremely stressful. Normal routines have been disrupted, schools and businesses have been shut down, many have been laid off or furloughed, and we've been ordered to stay home. So families are working, schooling and spending a lot of time together in one place. All that stress, anxiety and worry carries over to divorced couples and blended families. Many of the agreements and court orders were not created with a global pandemic in mind. So, that causes uncertainty. **Right now, those agreements may not be practical** because work, school and life have changed. Then adding to the mix, are people who don't get along on good days.

Q: What guidance are the courts providing?

A: The courts are all but closed, except for emergency orders. Emergencies during the pandemic are very different than before. With millions of people having lost their jobs or hours and filing for unemployment, I am **advising my clients to still pay their alimony and child support payments**. If you lost your job, been furloughed, or your business has been impacted, you can still file now to preserve your rights to a modification when things return to normal. But you still have to follow the court orders and agreements. Plus, you will be supporting your children and when things return back to normal the **courts will appreciate the goodwill shown**; especially through this tough time.

Q: How is coronavirus impacting custody arrangements?

A: Early on in the process there were mixed message between the courts and the governor's and mayor's office. In fact, only within the last week did the Maryland Office of Legal Counsel issue an official statement saying the travel under a custody order was permissible. That took about two weeks to issue. So, as it stands right now, follow your court orders and be flexible and use common sense. Communicate with the other parent; especially if someone gets sick. Follow the recommended guidelines for you and your kids.

Be patient and behave like an adult. I heard stories about parents criticizing each other about keeping up with online schooling, or when and where to wear facemask. Don't play the blame game. Stay away from that.

In family law, the primary standard is **what is in the best interest of the children**. That's what should prevail. For more helpful information on co-parenting during the crisis, check out one of our recent blogs, *Co-Parenting During COVID: A Practical Guide*.

Q: Will we see a spike in the number of divorces once we're past the pandemic?

A: Absolutely, it's going to be a divorce extravaganza. Following stressful events like the coronavirus situation, **we often see a surge in divorce filings, as has been reported in China**, because couples realize they just don't want to remain married to this person any longer. For couples whose **marriages are on shaky footing this might push them over the cliff**.

There could be a silver lining. For others, this **may be the rallying cry and a defining moment for couples that strengthens bonds and gives them an opportunity to fortify their relationship** and they come out of this more united than before.

Family Law Co-Chair, Tracey Coates, offered tips and advice on the Fox 5 morning show, *Good Day DC*, earlier this month.

Tips to Co-Exist

- Communicate
- Work together
- Be Patient
- Be Flexible
- Use Common Sense
- Put Children First

Advice for Divorced Couples

- Review your agreements
 - Alimony
 - Custody
 - Child Support
- Review finances
- Make back up plans
- Seek advice of a skilled attorney.