



**From the Desk of
LAWRENCE R. JONES**

**Former Judge of the New Jersey Superior Court
(Retired 2017)**

AN OPEN LETTER TO SEPARATED AND DIVORCED PARENTS

Dear Parents:

There are few events which are potentially more stressful and traumatic in a person's life than separation or divorce. In some cases, emotion overpowers reason, and may lead one to act in a way which is bitter, vengeful, and completely unlike the positive and logical person that he or she can be.

When a separation or divorce involves a minor child, however, a caring and responsible parent has a heightened duty to rise above emotionally negative impulses and decisions, and instead apply reason and patience by acting in a manner which promotes rather than poisons a child's emotional stability and health. As noted in one judicial opinion, among a child's paramount needs is "to have functional rather than dysfunctional parents, who can civilly cooperate with each other and serve as positive role models for their child in the process." Madison v. Davis, 438 N.J. Super 20, 45, 101 A.3d 1132, 1146-47 (Ch. Div. 2014).

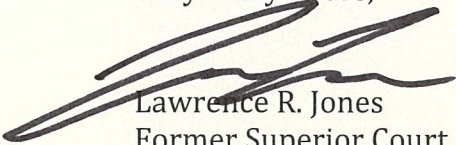
During my years as a family court judge, I regularly presided over countless custody hearings and parenting disputes. As part of the process, I frequently interviewed teens and pre-teens who found themselves involuntarily caught in the cross-fire of their parents' legal warfare. Many of these children were highly independent thinkers with poise and maturity far beyond their biological ages. A striking number, however, expressed very similar sentiments about their true wishes, regardless of whatever issues their parents were arguing about. Specifically, what these children wanted, most of all, was for the parental fighting to simply stop.

Following separation or divorce, perhaps the most important challenge for a strong and well-meaning parent is to demonstrate to his or her own child, through actions rather than words, how to be a positive role model and symbol of flexibility and reasonableness in communicating and cooperating with the child's other parent. Meeting this challenge may require an ongoing willingness to deal with an ex-spouse or ex-partner in a highly

diplomatic, composed and open-minded manner, regardless of any true feelings of disappointment or anger which one may personally harbor. A child who observes and experiences this type of parental behavior may strongly benefit from such role-modeling, and might even thank the parent later in life for leading by example and acting in such a dignified fashion.

Simply put, treating an ex-spouse or ex-partner with respect is invariably in a child's best interest, emotionally, socially, developmentally, and in every other way imaginable. Further, absent extreme cases, such as when there is a domestic violence restraining order in place, there is almost always room for two separated or divorced parents to reasonably and respectfully communicate, cooperate and compromise with each other. If nations which have been at war with each other for centuries can extend olive branches and reach peace treaties, then so can mothers and fathers. In fact, when one steps back and thinks about it, such peace is probably the most valuable gift which two separated or divorced parents can ever hope to give their child at any point in their lifetimes.

Very Truly Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lawrence R. Jones', written over a horizontal line.

Lawrence R. Jones
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