

For Madonna and Guy Ritchie's kids - Lourdes, Rocco, and David - coping with parents an ocean apart

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Now that Madonna and Guy Ritchie have acted their age and agreed on joint custody, will the former power couple be able to swallow their bitterness for the sake of their kids?

"The good news is that they spared the children the pain and suffering of a protracted custody battle," says Amy J.L. Baker, a developmental psychologist with an expertise in children and divorce. "The real challenge now is if these two people, who have a lot of hostility between them, can figure out how to co-parent these kids. It's enormously difficult, and very easy to get it wrong."

While it's difficult for any child to survive their parents' divorce, having superstars for parents can intensify the anguish.

"All their parents' animosity will be played out on a public stage and these kids will be spared nothing," Baker says. "Every misstep Madonna and Guy make with co-parenting will be exposed. There will be no privacy for the children."

Last week, according to British press reports, the couple agreed to share custody of their sons, Rocco, 8, and David, 3, who was adopted from Malawi. Lourdes, 14, whose father is New York resident Carlos Leon, is expected to live with Madonna.

While the terms of the divorce aren't expected to be ironed out until later this year, sources say Madonna is so relieved to be getting out of the eight-year marriage with relative ease that she'll probably agree to what could amount to \$15,000 a month in child support.

Madonna is reportedly worth around \$450 million, and though under British law Ritchie could have sought half Madge's assets, he agreed not to take his cut of his ex's wealth in exchange for joint custody.

But that doesn't mean the kids' time will be split 50/50 between the couple.

"You can never really split the baby down the middle," says divorce attorney Lois Liberman. "With the kids an ocean apart, you don't have the average two midweek and alternate weekend visits. They may attend school here in New York or in London. The question is, where will their primary residence be? In this case, Mom travels a lot. She's not PTA mom."

When any child lives through a divorce, she needs extra TLC from a loving grown-up, Baker says. Celebrities' children often don't get as much face time with their parents as ordinary kids do, and it doesn't get much better during the divorce.

"When Madonna is on world tour, she's not going to be there for them," Baker says. "Here is a case of where the kids have to mold their needs to the schedule of the parents."

"But when the entire universe worships your parents, it is harder for a child to express their sadness and disappointment," Baker says. "The message the child of a celebrity gets is that their parents are above it all. During a divorce, kids need to be able to say, 'I hate you' to a parent once in awhile. Celebrity kids can't do this as easily."

Right now the kids live in London, and Ritchie has said he wants Rocco to be schooled there. Lourdes is reportedly going to live with Madonna, who seems headed for a move back to New York.

When divorced parents live in two different cities, the kids' vacations tend to be split and heavily weighted to the parent who isn't living with them fulltime, Liberman says.

If indeed the kids move here with Mom, and she applies for private school admission, "She will have to push through all these other kids who are in the application process now," Liberman says. "We may hear through the grapevine,

maybe by February or March, which private school just took in three kids."

Regardless of where the kids sign up for school, the divorce will present each one with a different level of traumatic loss, experts say. Since Lourdes is not Ritchie's biological daughter, it will be up to Madonna whether to allow her to see Ritchie at all.

"No court can order visitation because he is not her father," says Joshua Forman, a partner in the law firm Chemtob Moss Forman & Talbert, LLP. "There is no longer any familial relationship."

That's not to say Lourdes and Ritchie aren't close, so if contact between them is limited, the teenage girl could suffer.

"Generally when you have parents getting divorced, the kids don't get divorced," Forman says. "But here, Lourdes is 'getting divorced' from Guy. Madonna can stop Lourdes from seeing Guy until she turns 21. Lourdes is also losing two brothers for half the time, and Rocco and David are losing a sibling for half the time."

If Lourdes puts up a big enough fuss, Mom might let her see Ritchie. "But pretty much, children don't get to say what they want," Forman says. As for the boys, David may spend more of his time with Madge than will Rocco, legal experts say.

"A very young child needs more frequent and continuing contact with his mother," says Robert Nachshin, an L.A. lawyer who represents various celebrities. "There may be one visitation schedule for Rocco and a different one for David."

David could suffer psychologically if separated from either parent for a long period because three-year-olds don't have a good sense of time, Baker says. The older kids will find it hard when they're told they can't spend as much time as they want to with friends.

"It will be, sorry you can't go to hockey today because you have to go to Britain to visit your family," Baker says. "Lourdes and Rocco will have less time to do what they want."

The best thing Madonna and Ritchie can do is not to manipulate the kids to reject the other parent, Baker says. Studies show that when this happens, children can suffer higher rates of depression, low self esteem and substance abuse, she says.

"Madonna and Guy need to work really hard not to do this," Baker says. "They have to support these kids' relationship with the other parent even though they themselves may hate the other parent."

A favorable outlook for the kids over time has a lot to do with how Madonna and Ritchie behave, agrees stepfamily coach Jill Brooke, editor of www.firstwivesworld.com. "When you're going through a divorce, you need to surrender your ego for a greater good," she says. "You need to love your children more than you hate your spouse."