

Helping Children Cope with Divorce

Overview

Ways to help children cope with their feelings and adjust to family life after divorce.

- Breaking the news
- What to expect from children of different ages
- Helping children adjust
- Helpful resources

It's often hard for children to get used to the idea of divorce and to adjust to being in a family with parents who live apart. If you're thinking about or going through a divorce, everyone in your family may be facing some difficult changes. You can take many steps to help your children prepare for and adjust to a separation or divorce and to bring your lives back into balance.

Breaking the news

Telling a child about a divorce is difficult for parents. And learning of a divorce is upsetting for children. There is no easy way to break the news. But you can help manage your children's reactions by careful thinking and advance planning.

- *Wait until you and your spouse have made a firm decision.* Giving your children partial or indefinite information will confuse them and increase their anxiety.
- *If possible, break the news together about your separation or divorce.* Your children need to know that both parents have made this important decision together. This is a very significant event in your child's life, so think carefully about the words you might use. Plan, and even practice, what you will say ahead of time. It's best to tell children about divorce in a face-to-face conversation. Your children may have very strong reactions to the news and need a lot of hugs, kisses, and other reassurance from you.
- *If you have more than one child, try to give the news to all the children at the same time, especially if they are close in age.* Telling your children at the same time shows that you understand that the divorce is important to all of them and allows them to support each other. It also gives all the children an equal opportunity to ask questions and share their feelings.
- *Be honest.* Your child has the right to understand what your divorce will mean to the family. Things are going to be different. Routines will be changed. One parent may be moving out. Children usually adjust more easily if they know what's going to happen. Don't give every detail, but don't sugarcoat the issues either. Playing down the truth only leads to false hope for reconciliation.
- *Use clear language.* Keep it simple (even though you know it's not). Try to see things from your child's point of view and choose straightforward words and explanations that will be easy to understand. "We still love you, but we aren't getting along with each other. So we've decided to get a divorce. That means we won't be living together anymore."

- *Keep the first discussions short.* Be careful not to give children more information than they can handle. Fifteen or twenty minutes at a time may be enough, depending on the children's ages. Don't explain too many changes at once. You'll need to keep talking about the divorce in the months to come as your children learn and understand more about how it affects their lives.
- *Make it clear that the divorce is something between you and your spouse.* Children need to be reassured that their parents are divorcing each other, not them. Reassure your children that you both love them. Keep reminding them that this separation or divorce is an adult decision and that they did not cause it by anything they did or said.
- *Plan for different reactions.* Children respond to the news of a divorce in very different ways. Mood swings and emotional outbursts are normal reactions. If you have more than one child, talk to each one individually after your announcement.

What to expect from children of different ages

There is no right or wrong way to respond to the news of a divorce. The only "typical" reaction children seem to have is that they almost never react the way you expect. They might lose interest in school, friendships, or having fun. They might sleep too much or too little. They may rebel and cause conflict within the family. They may withdraw and refuse to talk about their feelings. They may ask questions that seem unimportant or strange, like, "Who will make me pancakes now?" or "Will we be poor?"

Children of divorced parents go through a grieving process, much like children whose parents have died. Most children go through a variety of changing reactions over a period of months -- moving through grief, denial, anger, guilt, and depression, to a gradual acceptance. Different children react to divorce in different ways and go through these stages at different rates. But it can help to understand the most common reactions of children at different ages.

Infants and toddlers

Even though they may not understand what's happening, very young children are aware of changes in a household and react to stressful events like divorce.

- *Anxiety.* They may have trouble sleeping or become especially anxious when separated from you.
- *Unusual behavior.* Even children who are normally easygoing may start to cling, whine, or become cranky.

Young children

Preschoolers generally focus on themselves, asking lots of questions about day-to-day issues, "Where will I live? Who will take me to the playground?"

Children between the ages of 5 and 7 are old enough to begin to understand what divorce means, but they are not mature enough to cope with it without a lot of help from adults.

- *Denial.* Young children may deny that the divorce is occurring and may pretend that their parents will get back together again. They sometimes develop elaborate fantasies about bringing their parents back together and “saving” the family.
- *Fear of more loss.* Some children may worry that if one parent has left, then the other parent will also leave. They may feel abandoned, especially by the parent who is moving out or by a parent who has withdrawn emotionally because the parent is having difficulty handling the divorce. School-age children may fear losing friendships if they have to move to a new location.
- *Self-blame.* Young children may blame themselves for the divorce. When children feel guilty, they often feel bad about themselves. They need to hear, over and over again, that the divorce is not their fault. It is especially important for both parents to stay connected to their children during this time, giving them extra time and attention to reinforce this message.
- *Anger.* Feeling overwhelmed, they may show their anger with temper tantrums or unusually aggressive behavior. Remember that children need and want limits; it is another way that parents show that they care.
- *Anxiety.* They may have sleep problems, more bathroom accidents, and a renewed need for security objects, such as toys or blankets they may have given up long ago. They may revert to previously outgrown behaviors such as sucking their thumb.
- *Conflict.* They may feel they have to choose one parent over the other or feel guilty when they want to be with the other parent.

Older school-age children and teenagers

Children between 8 and 12 have more complex emotions that can influence many areas of their lives. Teenagers may feel angry or betrayed. They may test your concern for them or suddenly act aggressively or overly dependent.

- *Anger and sadness.* Older school-age children and teens may see one parent as the “victim” and feel very angry with the parent they blame for the divorce. They may swing rapidly between anger and intense sadness. They may also feel embarrassed by the divorce and resentful toward their parents for causing it.
- *Emptiness and grief.* As they experience grief over the loss of the family they had (or that they wished they had), older children and teens may experience a sense of emptiness and a lack of motivation. They may have difficulty concentrating, which can affect their grades.

- *Physical complaints.* Older school-age children may find talking about divorce too painful and may hold their feelings inside. Teenagers may not be willing or able to talk about their feelings. The tension of holding these emotions in may cause physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches, or chronic fatigue. These symptoms are real and need to be attended to. You may be able to use these problems as a way to help your children talk about their feelings and emotions if you believe they are ready to do so.
- *Problems in school.* Because of emotional or physical issues, your children's grades may suffer, and behavior problems may surface.
- *Embarrassment.* Teenagers are especially sensitive to how others see them, and being part of a family going through a divorce can draw attention to them in a way that embarrasses them and makes them uncomfortable. To avoid this embarrassment, they may hide what is going on at home from their friends -- just when they need to talk about it the most.
- *Taking on adult roles.* Teenagers sometimes try to fill the role of the departing parent and take on grownup responsibilities. They may show very adult concerns about money or their own future prospects for a happy marriage.
- *Arrested development.* Teenagers who have difficulty coping with the divorce and have strong feelings of abandonment by one or both parents sometimes go backward or get stuck in their emotional development. Some signs that may signal the need for professional counseling include extended periods of sadness or depression, withdrawal, angry or aggressive behaviors, use of alcohol or drugs, suicidal thoughts, destruction of property, inability to complete assignments in school or tasks at home, a lack of direction and motivation, or blaming others for personal difficulties. If your child is experiencing any of these feelings or behaviors, get help from your family physician or a mental health professional.

It is extremely important to keep older children from feeling that they need to become caretakers for adults or younger children in the family. Do your best to encourage them to spend time on activities that are appropriate to their age. Help them focus on the positive areas of their lives and keep them out of the divorce proceedings and legal negotiations. Encourage them to maintain their friendships and participate in healthy, enjoyable activities.

Adolescents need privacy and time with friends their age, but they also still need parents who act like parents, setting clear limits for their behavior and offering them emotional support. Because this is a stage in life when children normally try to separate and become independent of their parents, your child may not be willing to accept your help with managing the emotions caused by the divorce. Encourage your child to talk with other trusted adults. Counseling may also be helpful. Many teenagers find it easier to talk about what they're going through with other teenagers in the same situation. You might want to find out if your

child's school or a community hospital has "peer support" programs for children of divorced parents. In these programs, children of divorce meet and share their feelings with others who are having similar experiences.

Helping children adjust

While divorce is never easy for children, you can help them prepare for and adjust to this major change in their lives. With your help, your children will eventually be able to move past the difficult transition period and accept the new family structure.

- *Keep predictable daily routines.* Your children may ask you repeatedly what is scheduled for them. Knowing what to expect can help them feel more secure and in control of their own lives. A family calendar can be a good way to show when they will be spending time with each parent, attending regular events, or expecting the noncustodial parent to call. Try to keep children in the same schools and in the same neighborhoods.
- *Continue to set rules and limits.* Setting clear, consistent rules will let your children know how you expect them to behave -- especially if they'll be going back and forth between two households. Children can adjust to two different sets of rules as long as they know what's expected of them. Whenever possible, work with your ex-spouse. Hold your child responsible for his behaviors instead of excusing poor behavior because of the divorce or what you see as shortcomings as a parent in your ex-spouse.
- *Keep extended family in your children's lives.* Try to keep grandparents, extended family, caring adults, and good friends part of their lives. Children can experience a double loss when extended family members or close friends do not remain connected or when they make it uncomfortable to visit because they air their judgment about one of the parents. If your ex-spouse is unwilling or unable to be part of your child's life, try to find someone of the same sex that your child can rely on for caring, dependable support. Someone you are dating may not be the best choice, unless you are sure your relationship will last for some time.
- *Work with your child's school.* If your child's teachers or child care providers know about your divorce, they may be able to offer guidance and support and work with you to help your child be as happy and successful as possible. Chances are they have experience helping children through these kinds of adjustments.
- *Encourage teachers to tell you about your child's behavior and performance.* Ask teachers to help your children talk about their feelings and to let them know they are not alone. Try to keep them out of any conflicts you may have with your ex-spouse.
- *Avoid criticizing the other parent.* Don't criticize or blame the other parent in front of your child and don't allow others to do so either. Save it for your friends and other adults. One of the hardest parts of a divorce is helping children maintain a

positive relationship with both parents. Try to give your children permission to continue to love each parent.

- *Keep your children out of disputes.* Keep arguments and adult discussions between you and your ex-spouse, without involving your children. While it may be a good idea for you and the other parent to have cooperative discussions about your children's schoolwork in front of them, save disagreements or adult discussions about finances and legal issues for another conversation.
- *Don't make children messengers or go-betweens or ask them to keep secrets.* Don't confide in your children or make them an outlet for your emotional burdens. If you and your ex-spouse have trouble communicating, consider a mediator to help you deal with some of the more difficult issues.
- *Resolve situations quickly.* Sometimes parents separate and then remain "in limbo" without making a final decision about their relationship. This is difficult for children. Try to resolve the future of the relationship and then take action.
- *Support your child emotionally.* This is a very hard time for you and your children. It's OK to be sad in front of your children -- by doing so you give them permission to be open about their feelings, too. But resist the temptation to use your children as your emotional support. Instead, focus on ways you can support your children.
- *Keep showing your love for your children.* Knowing that they are loved helps children feel secure and supports their feelings of self-worth as they move into the uncharted territory of life after their parents' divorce. Say "I love you" often. And communicate with your child regularly by phone and, if possible, by mail and e-mail too.
- *Encourage your children to talk about their feelings.* Take your cues from your children about when and how much they would like to talk. Be ready to listen. Acknowledge their feelings, even if they change constantly and are painful to hear. "You must feel scared (or confused, or angry) about this." Allow them to express their anger and other feelings in acceptable ways -- even if the anger is directed at you. Reading books about divorce can help both you and your child.
- *Assure your children that it is OK to love both parents without feeling guilty.* One of the most important gifts you can give your children at this time is the permission and encouragement to love your ex-spouse.
- *Seek professional help for your children, if necessary.* Each family is different, but most people agree it takes at least six months for children to get used to the idea of a divorce. If your child seems to be having an unusually difficult time, counseling or support groups may be helpful. To find out about these, get in touch with the school counselor or school psychologist. You could also ask your doctor, a trusted friend, or a clergy member for referrals.

- *Enjoy activities together.* Find a variety of easy and low-cost activities that you can enjoy with your children. You will help children more this way than by overloading them with toys or games in an effort to buy their affection.

Divorce *is* stressful for children. But you can do many things to help children get through this painful change. By paying attention to your children's needs, by being aware of how your words and actions affect them, and by spending extra time with them, you can help them get through this difficult time and work with them to build a new life for your family.

Helpful resources

Books

Two Homes, by Claire Masurel, illustrated by Kady MacDonald Denton (Candlewick, 2003).

This picture book for babies and preschools centers on a young boy whose mother and father have different homes and sends the message that parents love their children no matter where they live.

How It Feels When Parents Divorce, by Jill Krementz (Knopf, 1988).

Children of different ages talk about their feelings about divorce in a picture book that speaks especially to 7- to 12-year-olds but may appeal to some children who are as young as 4 or as old as 16.

Web sites

American Academy of Pediatrics

www.aap.org

The official site of the American Academy of Pediatrics has medically accurate information for adults on many topics related to children's physical or emotional health, including pages on divorce, single parents, and stepfamilies.

KidsHealth

www.kidshealth.org

This site for school-age children includes "A Kid's Guide to Divorce," which talks about divorce in language children can understand.

National Association of School Psychologists

www.nasponline.org

Parent information and resources are provided that address a variety of learning and behavioral concerns, including a fact sheet called *Divorce: A Parents' Guide for Supporting Children*.

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