
Helping Your Child Through a Divorce

Thousands of kids experience the stress of divorce each year. How they react depends on their age, personality, and the circumstances of the separation and divorce process.

Every divorce will affect the kids involved — and many times the initial reaction is one of shock, sadness, frustration, anger, or worry. But kids also can come out of it better able to cope with stress, and many become more flexible, tolerant young adults.

The most important things that both parents can do to help kids through this difficult time are:

- Keep visible conflict, heated discussions, and legal talk away from the kids.
- Minimize the disruptions to kids' daily routines.
- Confine negativity and blame to private therapy sessions or conversations with friends outside the home.
- Keep each parent involved in the kids' lives.

Adults going through separation and divorce need support — from friends, professionals, clergy, and family. But don't seek support from your kids, even if they seem to want you to.

Breaking the News

As soon as you're certain of your plans, talk to your kids about your decision to live apart. Although there's no easy way to break the news, if possible have both parents there for this conversation. It's important to try to leave feelings of anger, guilt, or blame out of it. Practice how you're going to manage telling your kids so you don't become upset or angry during the talk.

The discussion should fit the child's age, maturity, and temperament. But it should always include this message: What happened is between mom and dad and is not the child's fault. Most kids will feel they're to blame even after parents have said that they're not. So it's vital for parents to keep giving this reassurance.

Tell your kids that sometimes adults change the way they love each other or can't agree on things and so they have to live apart. But remind them that kids and parents are tied together for life, by birth or adoption. Parents and kids often don't agree on things, but that is part of the circle of life — parents and kids don't stop loving each other or get divorced from each other.

Give kids enough information to prepare them for the upcoming changes in their lives. Try to answer their questions as truthfully as possible. Remember that kids don't need to know all the reasons behind a divorce (especially if it involves blaming the other parent). It's enough for them to understand what will change in their daily routine — and, just as important, what will not.

With younger kids, it's best to keep it simple. You might say something like: "Mom and dad are going to live in different houses so they don't fight so much, but we both love you very much."

Older kids and teens may be more in tune with what parents have been going through, and might have more questions based on what they've overheard and picked up on from conversations and fights.

Handling Kids' Reactions

Tell kids who are upset about the news that you recognize and care about their feelings, and reassure them that all of their upset feelings are perfectly OK and understandable. You might say: "I know this is very upsetting for you. Can we try to think of something that would make you feel better?" or "We both love you and are sorry that we have to live apart."

Not all kids react right away. Let yours know that's OK, too, and that you can talk when they're ready. Some kids try to please their parents by acting as if everything is fine, or try to avoid any difficult feelings by denying that they feel any anger or sadness at the news. Sometimes stress comes out in other ways — at school, or with friends, or in changes to their appetite, behavior or sleep patterns.

Whether your kids express fear, worry, or relief about your separation and divorce, they'll want to know how their own day-to-day lives might change.

Be prepared to answer these and other questions:

- Who will I live with?
- Where will I go to school?
- Will I move?
- Where will each parent live?
- Where will we spend holidays?
- Will I still get to see my friends?
- Can I still go to camp this summer?
- Can I still do my favorite activities?

Being honest is not always easy when you don't have all the answers or when kids are feeling scared or guilty about what's going on. But telling them what they need to know at that moment is always the right thing to do.

Helping Kids Cope

Many kids — and parents — grieve the loss of the kind of family they had hoped for, and kids especially miss the presence of both parents and the family life they had. That's why it's common and very natural for some kids to hold out hope that their parents will someday get back together — even after the finality of divorce has been explained to them.

Mourning the loss of a family is normal, but over time both you and your kids will come to accept the new situation. So reassure them that it's OK to wish that mom and dad will reunite, but also explain the finality of your decisions.

Here are some ways to help kids cope with the upset of a divorce:

- **Encourage honesty.** Kids need to know that their feelings are important to their parents and that they'll be taken seriously.
- **Help them put their feelings into words.** Kids' behavior can often clue you in to their feelings of sadness or anger. You might say: "It seems as if you're feeling sad right now. Do you know what's making you feel so sad?" Be a good listener, even if it's difficult for you to hear what they have to say.
- **Legitimize their feelings.** Saying "I know you feel sad now" or "I know it feels lonely without dad here" lets kids know that their feelings are valid. It's important to encourage kids to get it all out before you start offering ways to make it better. Let kids know it's also OK to feel happy or relieved or excited about the future.
- **Offer support.** Ask, "What do you think will help you feel better?" They might not be able to name something, but you can suggest a few ideas — maybe just to sit together, take a walk, or hold a favorite stuffed animal. Younger kids might especially appreciate an offer to call daddy on the phone or to make a picture to give to mommy when she comes at the end of the day.
- **Keep yourself healthy.** For adults, separation and divorce is highly stressful. That pressure may be amplified by custody, property, and financial issues, which can bring out the worst in people.

Finding ways to manage your own stress is essential for you and your entire family. Keeping yourself as physically and emotionally healthy as possible can help combat the effects of stress, and by making sure you're taking care of your own needs, you can ensure that you'll be in the best possible shape to take care of your kids.

- **Keep the details in check.** Take care to ensure privacy when discussing the details of the divorce with

friends, family, or your lawyer. Try to keep your interactions with your ex as civil as possible, especially when you're interacting in front of the kids.

Take the high road — don't resort to blaming or name-calling within earshot of your kids, no matter what the circumstances of the separation. This is especially important in an "at fault" divorce where there have been especially hurtful events, like infidelity. Take care to keep letters, e-mails, and text messages in a secure location as kids will be naturally curious if there is a high-conflict situation going on at home.

- **Get help.** This is not the time to go it alone. Find a support group, talk to others who have gone through this, use online resources, or ask your doctor or religious leaders to refer you to other resources. Getting help yourself sets a good example for your kids on how to make a healthy adjustment to this major change.

Help from a counselor, therapist, or friend will also maintain healthy boundaries with your kids. It's very important not to lean on your kids for support. Older kids and those who are eager to please may try to make you feel better by offering a shoulder to cry on. No matter how tempting that is, it's best not to let them be the provider of your emotional support. Let your kids know how touched you are by their caring nature and kindness, but do your venting to a friend or therapist.

The Importance of Consistency

Consistency and routine can go a long way toward providing comfort and familiarity that can help your family during this major life change. When possible, minimize unpredictable schedules, transitions, or abrupt separations.

Especially during a divorce, kids will benefit from one-on-one time with each parent. No matter how inconvenient, try to accommodate your ex-partner as you figure out visitation schedules.

It's natural that you'll be concerned about how a child is coping with this change. The best thing that you can do is trust your instincts and rely on what you know about your kids. Do they seem to be acting differently than usual? Is a child doing things like regressing to younger behaviors, such as thumb-sucking or bedwetting? Do emotions seem to be getting in the way of everyday routines, like school and social life?

Behavioral changes are important to watch out for — any new or changing signs of moodiness; sadness; anxiety; school problems; or difficulties with friends, appetite, and sleep can be signs of a problem.

Older kids and teens may be vulnerable to risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, skipping school, and defiant acts. Regardless of whether such troubles are related to the divorce, they are serious problems that affect a teen's well-being and indicate the need for outside help.

Fighting in Front of the Kids

Although the occasional argument between parents is expected in any family, living in a battleground of continual hostility and unresolved conflict can place a heavy burden on a child. Screaming, fighting, arguing, or violence can make kids feel worried and afraid.

Parents in open conflict set a bad example for their kids, who are still learning how to form their own relationships. Kids whose parents express anger and hostility are much more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems that continue past childhood.

Talking with a mediator or divorce counselor can help couples air their grievances and hurt to each other in a way that doesn't harm their children. Though it may be difficult, working together in this way will spare kids the hurt caused by continued bitterness and anger.

Adjusting to a New Living Situation

Because divorce can be such a big change, adjustments in living arrangements should be handled gradually.

Several types of living situations should be considered:

- one parent may have sole custody
- joint custody in which both legal and physical custody are shared
- joint custody where one parent has "tie-breaking" authority in certain medical or educational settings

Which one is right for your kids? That's a tough question and often the one that couples spend most time disagreeing on. Although some kids can thrive spending half their time with each parent, others seem to need the stability of having one "home" and visiting with the other parent. Some parents choose to both remain in the same home — but this only works in the rarest of circumstances and in general should be avoided.

Whatever arrangement you choose, your child's needs should come first. Avoid getting involved in a tug of war as a way to "win." When deciding how to handle holidays, birthdays, and vacations, stay focused on what's best for the kids. It's important for parents to resolve these issues themselves and not ask the kids to choose.

During the preteen years, when kids become more involved with activities apart from their parents, they may need different schedules to accommodate their changing priorities. Ideally, kids benefit most from consistent support from both parents, but they may resist equal time-sharing if it interrupts school or their social lives. Be prepared for their thoughts on time-sharing, and try to be flexible.

Your child may refuse to share time with you and your spouse equally and may try to take sides. If this happens, as hard as it is, try not to take it personally. Maintain the visitation schedule and emphasize the importance of the involvement of both parents.

Kids sometimes propose spending an entire summer, semester, or school year with the noncustodial parent. But this may not mean that they want to move. Listen to and explore these options if they're brought up. This kind of arrangement can work well in "friendly" divorces, but is not typical of higher-conflict situations.

Parenting Under Pressure

As much as possible, both parents should work to keep routines and discipline the same in both households. Similar expectations about bedtimes, rules, and homework will reduce anxiety, especially in younger children.

Even though you can't enforce the rules in your ex-partner's home, stick to them in yours. Relaxing limits, especially during a time of change, tends to make kids insecure and less likely to recognize your parental authority later. And buying things to replace love or letting kids act out is not in their best interests, and you could struggle to reel them back in once the dust settles. Instead, you can lavish affection on them — kids don't get spoiled by too many hugs or comforting words.

Divorce can be a major crisis for a family. However, if you and your former spouse can work together and communicate civilly for the benefit of your children, the original family unit can continue to be a source of strength, even if stepfamilies enter the picture.

So remember to:

- **Get help dealing with your own painful feelings about the divorce.** If you're able to adjust, your kids will be more likely to do so, too.
- **Be patient with yourself and with your child.** Emotional concerns, loss, and hurt following divorce take time to heal and this often happens in phases.
- **Recognize the signs of stress.** Consult your kids' teachers, doctor, or a child therapist for guidance on how to handle specific problems you're concerned about.

Changes of any kind are hard — know that you and your kids can and will adjust to this one. Finding your inner strength and getting help to learn new coping skills are hard work, but can make a big difference to helping your family get through this difficult time.

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