

PARENT SERIES

University of Kansas, Clinical Child Psychology Program
Parent Series Editor: Carolyn S. Schroeder, Ph.D., ABPP

Divorce and Separation

Helping Your Child Adjust

Bridget Cho, M.A. and Rebecca M. Kanine, M.A.

Parental separation often follows a period of family turmoil during which the parents' relationship has been strained and often marked by open conflict. However, even when there is family conflict, the thought of parents separating distresses most children. Children may initially focus only on the potential negatives of the change in the family. Separation involves many major changes for families and usually requires a lengthy adjustment period for both children and adults.

While separation and divorce are stressful for the whole family, these decisions are often in the best interests of both children and parents. In fact, children typically have better outcomes when parents in high-conflict relationships separate than when they stay together. In a time when 40-50 percent of U.S. couples separate, it is common for children to have divorced parents. In fact, research shows that most children of divorce have healthy emotional adjustment. Parents' sensitivity to their children's needs can help children make effective, long-lasting adjustments. There are several things parents can do to help their children through and after divorce.

Top 10 tips for helping children through divorce

1. Minimize conflict in front of children.
2. Explain why you are divorcing in a child-appropriate way.
3. Don't use children as weapons.
4. Communicate with each other, not through the child.
5. Maintain routine and consistency.
6. Take care of yourself so you can be a better parent.
7. Listen.
8. Don't use children as spies.
9. Don't criticize your ex-partner in front of your children.
10. Ask for help if you need it.

Factors Influencing Adjustment

The Relationship Between Divorcing Parents

Although the marriage is ending, it's almost always in children's best interests for parents to maintain a co-parenting relationship. Ongoing conflict makes it hard for parents to work as a team. Such conflict can lead to poor adjustment for children. When one parent expresses strong negative views of the other, children may believe they must adopt the same views or risk losing one parent's love. This may decrease children's trust and sense of security, which in turn can negatively affect their adjustment.

Mediation can help parents communicate effectively with each other, and keep their children's needs as the top priority. Another great way for parents to work together is to create a *parenting plan*. This is a document that parents write together agreeing on how they will make parenting decisions, what the custody agreement and visitation schedule will look like, and how they plan to resolve disagreements.

See *Making Divorce Easier on Your Child* in the Resources section for a sample parenting-plan template.

Parent-Child Relationships

Custodial

Children benefit from regular, conflict-free access to both parents. Custodial parents can foster their children's adjustment by providing warmth, emotional support, adequate monitoring and age-appropriate expectations. Consistent, supportive discipline gives children the structure they need, particularly during stressful times. The stability and consistency provided by custodial parents are strong predictors of child-adjustment before and after divorce. Moreover, children need the security of knowing that they are expected to behave regardless of the parents' situation.

Noncustodial

Things that noncustodial parents can do when their children visit include being consistent with consequences, upholding household rules, being involved in the children's education, and finding ways to support the children's interests. Attending sports or school events is another way to support the children, regardless of where they live.

Parents Coping with Stress

Divorced or separated parents may experience less social support, difficult emotions, fewer financial resources and the need to work longer hours. These changed life circumstances can reduce time spent with children, which may increase the children's sense of loss when they most need parental reassurance. Finding effective ways to juggle these increased demands without upsetting the parent-child relationship helps children make positive adjustments to the new way of life.

Simple ways parents can take care of themselves include scheduling time for hobbies; spending time with supportive friends and family; staying healthy with exercise, sleep, and a balanced diet. Soothing activities such as walks can also help.

Children can accompany parents on these activities. Parents should also reach out to their social support network — family and friends, for instance — for child-care help, especially while adjusting to single parenthood.

In addition to the increasing demands, parents may feel emotional about the end of their relationships. Intense and conflicting feelings are normal. It's important to identify and acknowledge these feelings. When parents find it hard to cope with the stressors of divorce, they may benefit from professional help. Taking care of yourself puts you in a better position to take care of your children.

Child Emotions and Behavior

Common child behaviors after divorce, and suggestions for handling them

| If children do this | Try doing this. |
|--|---|
| Cry a lot, seem withdrawn, and say they feel sad | Let them know that you understand they are sad, and it's okay to feel that way. Reassure them that you are there to help them get through this tough time. |
| Seem sad, but won't say what's wrong. | Encourage them to share their feelings. Listen closely. Help them put into words how they feel. |
| Worry a lot or seem afraid to do things they normally do, such as sleeping in their own beds or going to school. | Keep a clear, consistent routine. Respect anxious feelings; don't minimize them. Keep calm during separations and goodbyes. Praise children for separating without distress. |
| Break rules and argue with adults at home and school. | Don't change rules. It's important to stay consistent. Be warm and loving while delivering consequences. Communicate with your ex-partner to make sure rules are the same at both houses. |
| Behave normally and say they feel okay about the divorce. | Believe them. Don't push the issue. Unless you believe they're hiding distress, you may do more harm than good by pressing. |

Behaviors by Child Age

Divorce can interfere with child development, regardless of age. However, reactions may differ based on age or development. If you notice any of these common behaviors, consider talking to your pediatrician or therapist.

| Age range | Issues for the child | Signs of distress | What parents can do |
|----------------------|---|---|---|
| Infants and toddlers | Infants and toddlers depend completely on their parents to meet their needs. This is also a critical time for building parent-child bonds. Changes in parents' work schedules might mean more time at day care and less time with parents, making bonding more difficult. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losing developmental accomplishments; for example, a child who just learned to walk will now only crawl. • Appetite or sleep pattern changes. • More fussiness. • More fearfulness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep consistent routines. • Hold, rock, and soothe your infant/toddler. • Provide lots of affection. • Make sure the child spends time with both parents. |
| Preschoolers | At this age, children are very focused on themselves. They may feel that they did something bad to make the divorce happen. They are also becoming more imaginative, so they may construct fearful fantasies about what might happen. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not progressing developmentally; for example, a 4 year old who still isn't toilet-trained. • Clinginess. • Seeming sad and lonely. • Increased anger. • Being bossy or controlling. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about routines and stick to them. • Remind the child of your love and how that will never change. • Read books about divorce together. • Check with preschool teachers for signs of distress. |

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| Early school-aged | Family is important at this age,; changes in family structure may make children feel insecure. They may fear loss of parental love, or try to comfort parents who seem distressed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying a lot or seeming very sad • Complaining of sickness, such as headaches and stomachaches. • Change in grades or disliking school. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep communication open. • Accept your child’s feelings no matter what they are. • Be clear that parents are not reuniting, will always love the child. |
| Later school-aged | Children are more independent, and friends become more important at this stage. Children are often concerned that the divorce will disrupt their social lives. They may feel angry or resentful toward one or both parents, and may take sides. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boys: more academic problems or fights at school. • Girls: more likely to try to be “extra good.” • Saying they don’t care about the divorce. • Complaining of sickness. • Premature sexual activity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be adult; don’t let children become caregivers. • Stay involved in your child’s school and social life. • Keep communication open. • Model taking care of yourself and appropriately expressing your feelings. |
| Adolescents | Adolescents’ social lives are extremely important. They may feel embarrassed about the divorce. Youth at this age are also more aware of “adult” problems, such as money, and may take on these concerns. Parents may turn to adolescents for help or comfort, which may be stressful or frightening. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased sexual behavior. • Delinquent activity, such as drug use, fights, skipping school. • Self-harm such as cutting skin. • Changing plans for leaving home; planning to leave early or delaying. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and encourage • Model taking care of yourself and appropriately expressing your feelings. • Be a parent, not a friend. • Don’t make your child’s emotions or behaviors about you • Let your adolescent have input in scheduling visitation. |

Visitation and Living Arrangements

There is no evidence that one custody or visitation arrangement is better than another. The most important factor is that the child’s needs take priority over parental needs.

Consider children’s developmental levels in making custody arrangements. Younger children may need more frequent but shorter visits with the non-primary parent, such as an overnight during the week, and a day and night weekend visit. Younger children also benefit from predictable visitation schedules.

Calendars can help younger children know when they will be with their moms or dads. Let them carry favorite clothing and toys between the two homes, and receive phone calls and mail from the other parent.

Teenagers, on the other hand, may want shorter visits during the school year, with extended time during summers or school vacations. Let teenagers contribute to scheduling decisions, so visitation won't interfere with their peer relationships and activities. If parental conflict is a problem, formal schedules can help protect the child, regardless of age, from the conflict. Flexibility of both parents is important so children can pursue their own interests and activities, while feeling comfortable moving between homes.

Repartnering

Repartnering is as common as divorce. It may involve dating, cohabitating or remarrying. Many children live in *blended families*. These include a couple and their children from prior relationships. Repartnering presents a new adjustment for children. This change brings additional challenges, such as potential conflict between the child and the parent's new partner, relationships with stepsiblings, and confusion about parenting roles. Although some children in blended families experience emotional, behavioral and academic problems, most do well in school and don't have emotional or behavioral problems.

Stepparents can help create quality relationships with children by building warm, supportive relationships, rather than focusing on controlling or disciplining stepchildren, especially soon after the remarriage. Children may initially resist stepparents' attempts at relationship-building. However, children have warmer, closer bonds with stepparents who persist in affection. Stepparents may have more success connecting with their stepchildren by engaging in shared activities of the child's choosing.

WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN ADJUST

How to talk to your child about divorce

- Parents should discuss how and when to tell children about the separation. Parents should share honest information appropriate to the children's developmental levels. To help children understand that this is a joint decision, it's best for them to hear this news at the same time from both parents. Here are a couple of ways you might start the conversation with your children:

"Your father and I were very much in love when we married and had the two of you, but we have grown apart over the years. I'm sorry this happened, but your father and I feel that it's best for us to separate. We will always love you both and will always be your parents even though we won't be living together."

- It's usually best to tell all the family's children at the same time. This prevents the children having to "keep secrets" and lets them support each other.
- Children's books about divorce may help in discussing your divorce or separation. See the Resources section for recommendations.
- Children's fantasies are often more frightening than the reality of the separation. Honesty lets children continue to trust their parents. Encourage children to ask questions. If you don't know the answer, say so.

- Children need to know who will live where, and when they will see each parent. This may change in the days immediately following the initial separation. Keep children informed as changes occur. A visual schedule showing when children will be with each of their parents may be helpful.

“We’ve decided it’s best for us to separate. This means that I will move into an apartment, Saturday, and won’t live in this house anymore. You can help me move, if you like, and see where I’ll be living. We can talk on the phone any time and you’ll visit me every other weekend. We’ll also have dinner together during the week.”

- It’s okay to share your feelings with your children. Doing so appropriately can help children learn to express their own feelings. However, uncontrolled expressions of sadness or rage can upset children and are most likely not in their best interests.

“Yes, I’m crying. It can be hard to deal with big changes like this. It’s okay for us to be sad about this. If you feel sad, you can always talk to me about it.”

- Reassure your children that they didn’t cause the separation. Sometimes children think that if they caused the separation, they can reunite parents by behaving differently.

“Sometimes kids think that they in some way caused their parents’ separation. They might not have gone to bed when asked or were fighting too much. While these things might make parents mad, I want you to know that there was nothing you did to cause your dad and me to separate. It’s not your fault. We are unhappy with each other, not with you.”

- Let children know that both parents will continue to love and care for them.

“We will both always love you. While we won’t see each other every day or spend holidays together as a family, we both will always be your parents and take care of you.”

- Tell the children that you will inform other important people about the separation, such as teachers, grandparents and parents of the child’s best friend. This relieves children of that burden and lets them seek support from these people.

“Nana, Grandy, Gram, and Poppa already know that your mother and I are separating. Tomorrow we’ll let your teachers know, as well as Jane and Mary’s parents. It’s also okay for you to tell people that we’re separating.”

- Keep communication open. Children may ask the same questions repeatedly. Be patient. Answer each time as best you can. If you think your child is struggling to bring up divorce-related issues with you, start the conversation with them in a gentle, open way.

“You seem a little down. Want to talk about it?”

Dos and Don'ts

Do

- **Avoid conflict with the other parent** whenever possible, especially in the child's presence. This is particularly important when the child is in transition between parents.
- **Limit your own social activities for a while** and be available for your child. This doesn't mean you must always be home, but limit your time away.
- **Establish a daily routine as a single parent** so your child will know that things will be okay. Try scheduling regular play times, or "hang out" times for older youth.
- **Help children express their angry or hurt feelings**, while staying neutral toward the other parent.

"I'm sorry that your mother is late again. I can see that it makes you angry, especially when you were looking forward to seeing her."

- **Maintain regular routines and schedules** as much as possible. Avoid major changes such as moving, and changing schools or caregivers. Children need stability in times of stress. The more their daily routines can stay the same, the faster they will adjust to the separation.
- **Uphold regular household rules and discipline.** Young children especially need the security of firm limits for inappropriate behavior, but will undoubtedly test these limits, especially during the transition of the divorce process. Try to acknowledge your child's feelings while providing consistent consequences for the inappropriate behavior.

"Henry, I know you are very angry about your dad and me separating, but you are not allowed to yell at the dog. You may talk to me about your feelings, draw a picture to show how you feel, or go throw the ball against the side of the house. You might think of some other ways to get rid of your anger, but you can not hurt the dog, people or other things."

- **Let your child tell you about life at the other home.** If children feel comfortable with each parent, they are likely to want to share information which might be hard for you to hear, such as "having fun at the beach with Dad's new girlfriend." If it's hard for you to manage your emotions when you get such information, it may be best to tell your child.

Don't

- **Don't criticize or condemn the other parent** with the child present. However, you do not have to defend or excuse an unreliable or irresponsible parent.
- **Don't expect children to take care of you** or meet your emotional needs during this stressful time, no matter their ages. Establish your own support systems. It's your responsibility to support your child, not the other way around.
- **Don't have your child deliver messages** to the other parent, no matter how innocuous they may seem. This puts the child in the inappropriate position of mediating your relationship.
- **Don't question your child about his or her visits** with the other parent. This makes children "spies" or informants.

RESOURCES

Online

- Healthy divorce: How to make your split as smooth as possible (APA Help Center)
 - <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/healthy-divorce.aspx>

- Making stepfamilies work (APA Help Center)
 - <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stepfamily.aspx>
- Our Family Wizard: offers communication tools (e.g., phone apps) for co-parents and information and resources organized by state
 - <https://www.ourfamilywizard.com/>

Books

Parents

Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust. Nicholas Long, Ph.D.; and Rex Forehand, Ph.D. Published by McGraw-Hill (2002).

This book discusses the psychological impact of divorce on children. It offers expert strategies parents can use to help their children cope with divorce. It is based on the authors' clinical experience, as well as their extensive research on divorce-related problems.

Parenting Through Divorce: Helping Your Children Thrive During and After the Split. Lisa Renee Reynolds, Ph.D. Published by Skyhorse Publishing (2011).

This book provides parents with information about the typical emotional reactions to divorce of youth at different age groups, as well as common-sense advice on how parents can guide their children during that time. It is written by a licensed psychologist specializing in marriage counseling and therapy for families going through divorce.

Younger Children

Who's in a Family? Robert Skutch. Published by Random House Children's Books (1997).

This book gives children examples of various types of non-traditional families, including single-parent, interracial, and families with gay and lesbian parents. It aims to help normalize various family arrangements. Suggested age range: 3-7 years.

Was It the Chocolate Pudding? A Story for Little Kids About Divorce. Sandra Levins, Illustrated by Bryan Langdo. Published by the American Psychological Association (2006).

This story is about a young boy who feels that his parents' divorce is his fault, a common childhood reaction. The book addresses the confusion often felt by young children during divorce. It aims to provide comforting reassurance about the questions children may have during divorce. Suggested age range: 2-8 years.

Do You Sing Twinkle? A Story About Remarriage and New Family. Sandra Levins, Illustrated by Bryan Langdo. Published by the American Psychological Association (2009).

This story concerns a young boy's experience when his mother remarries and gains stepchildren. It addresses the many questions and feelings children may have while adjusting to remarriage and joint-custody situations. Suggested age range: 3-6 years.

Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families. Lauren Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. Published by Little Brown Books for Young Readers (1986).

This children's book depicts various issues related to divorce, including possible causes and effects; living with a single parent; spending holidays in separate households; and adjusting to stepparents. Suggested age range: 1-6 years.

Older Children

A Smart Girl's Guide to her Parents' Divorce. Nancy Holyoke. Published by American Girl Publishing, Inc. (2009).

In this book, American Girl answers girls' letters about various aspects of divorce, including parents' remarriage. The book also provides advice from girls who have experienced their parents' divorce. Suggested age range: 8-12 years.

My Parents Are Divorced Too: A Book For Kids, 2nd Edition. Melanie Ford, Annie Ford, Steven Ford, and Jann Blackstone-Ford. Published by the American Psychological Association (2006).

In this book, three youths discuss their personal experiences coping with the difficulties of divorce. They provide advice to young people going through parental divorce. Suggested age range: 8-12 years.