

Parenting News

A Quarterly Newsletter for Parents Everywhere • Summer 2001



Helping children cope with divorce

A separation or divorce is almost always upsetting to children. The first year after a divorce is often the worst, as children react with anger, fear, depression, and guilt. Their reactions after the second year often depend upon their parents' behavior up to that time. How parents treat each other and respond to their children before and after the divorce can greatly affect how the children will adjust over the long term.

During the first year, parents can expect these reactions:

- **Preschoolers.** Children 3 to 5 will feel sad, cry more often, and become more demanding. Some will become "perfect" children, trying always to be well-behaved. Others may revert to babyish behavior such as thumb sucking and wetting their pants.
- **School-agers.** Children 6 to 8 find divorce especially troublesome. They are deeply saddened and may cry openly. Children 9 to 12 often react with anger and may take sides with one parent.

They may complain of ailments such as headaches and have a hard time getting along with friends. All school-agers may have trouble with their work at school.

- **Teen-agers.** Children 13 to 18 will vary widely in their reactions. Some seem to cope well and even are helpful to younger siblings. Others, feeling angry and betrayed, will set themselves off from the family and act out. Still others will become depressed and withdraw from everyone.

Family experts offer these tips for helping children cope with the crisis.

Before the separation or divorce

Children will feel less fearful and abandoned if both parents prepare them for what will happen.

- **Tell them what to expect.** *"Mom and Dad are getting a divorce. Dad is moving out in two weeks. We won't live together anymore."*
- **Explain why.** Give a simple explanation the children can understand. *"We don't love each other anymore as we did when we got married."* If children don't get an explanation, they may create one. The danger is they will blame themselves. Assure them that no one is to blame, not the children, and not one parent or the other.
- **Give reassurance.** *"We still love you and we always will. We are going to take care of you until you grow up."*

During and after the divorce

Young children see the world as revolving around themselves. They have little understanding of cause and effect. As a result, many children believe they caused the divorce somehow: *"Mommy and Daddy argued all the time because I wasn't good."* Children may also think they can get parents back together. They may get into fights, steal, or get sick as a way to bring parents together.

- **Ask children if they think they caused the divorce.** Parents need to ask because children often keep this thought as a secret. Reassure them that this is an adult decision, and there is nothing the children or anyone else could have done to prevent it.
- **If the decision to divorce is final, be absolutely clear about it.** Explain that there is nothing the child can do about it. There is no chance Mom and Dad will get back together.
- **Acknowledge sad feelings.** *"I know this is hard for you. We all feel sad."* Give plenty of love and affection. *"Let me hold you. Tell me what's the saddest thing you're feeling now."*
- **Provide children's books about divorce.** Check with the public library for titles.

Research has shown that children who adjust well after a divorce usually have parents who are cordial and cooperative. By contrast, when parents fight with each other and involve their children in their arguments, children suffer.

- **Treat the other parent with respect.** Don't talk badly about the other parent in front of your children.
- **Discuss disagreements** between the two parents only or with a counselor. Protect your children from your haggling.
- **Listen fully** to what your child or the other parent is saying. Maintain eye contact. Listen to feelings as well as words. Don't pretend to be listening while you're thinking about what you're going to say next.
- If one parent loses control, suggest that you **save the discussion for another time.** *"This seems to be getting out of hand. When can we talk about it again?"*
- **Discourage children from taking sides.** *"This is something Mom and Dad need to work out."*
- **Work out a custody agreement** that allows both parents regular and hassle-free access to the children. Recognize that children must form their own relationships with the other parent.
- **If safety is an issue, work out an arrangement with the court.** A judge's restraining order can order a parent not to use alcohol or drugs during a visit or leave a child unsupervised, for example. Some parents agree to let the other parent visit but only in the presence of another person.
- **Pay child support** on time and in full. Children experience enough stress and pain without worrying about lunch money and school supplies.
- **Stick to the visitation schedule.** Be on time and be cordial. If you need to change the schedule for some reason, call in advance and explain. If changes happen often, consider working out another schedule.
- **Avoid using children as messengers.** Exchange information with the other parent adult-to-adult. Don't ask children to deliver child support payments. Don't pump children for information about the other parent.
- **Make it clear that you are the adult.** Avoid discussing money or work problems with children. Find a friend or family member to confide in. Avoid treating a child as a little adult or a replacement for your missing spouse.
- **Guide your children warmly but firmly.** Children will feel safer and more secure if they know you are in control. Set rules for your household and enforce them. Recognize that children may live under different rules while with the other parent.
- **Cooperate when there is an accident or emergency.** Accidents and illness are, part of childhood. Be available to take a child to the doctor or pick up a prescription. Give your contact information to caregivers and teachers so they will know how to reach you.
- **Seek help** for your child if problem behaviors continue. Ask your doctor or the child's teacher for names of counselors or programs that can help your child.

Books for children

Alpert-Gillis, Linda, and Melnyk, Bernadette. *Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches Never Change*. Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Medical Center, 1993.

Grindley, Sally. *A New Room for William*. Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 2000.

Lansky, Vicki. *It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear: A Read-Together Book for Parents and Young Children During Divorce*. Minnetonka, Minn.: Book Peddlers, 1998.

Stern, Zoe, Evan, and Ellen. *Divorce Is Not the End of the World*. Berkeley, Calif.: Tricycle Press, 1997.

Books for parents

Bienenfeld, Florence, Ph.D. *Helping Your Child Through Your Divorce*. Alameda, Calif.: Hunter House Publishers, 1995.

Teyber, Edward. *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. New York: Lexington Books, 1992.

Texas Parenting News is published by the Texas Workforce Commission for free distribution. ©2001, TWC.

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