

Helping Children Cope With Divorce

With the right kind of support, children can successfully cope with the challenges posed by a parental divorce. Anyone who is close to a child can play an important role and despite the complications that divorce brings, supporting children is relatively easy. Support starts with consistently being there and being involved, spending time together and having fun, responding to a child's needs, and when the time is right, being a good listener.

Divorce brings about many emotions for children. Some of the most common are grief or sadness, a sense of loss, insecurity, mistrust, anger, and fear. Keep these emotions in mind, but rather than assume what a child is feeling, find the right opportunity to ask. The right opportunity might be following an instance where the child displays emotions through their behavior. This helps put "feeling talk" into context.



Remember that the best response to "feeling talk" is empathy. Simple statements such as "It's very understandable that you would have some of these thoughts and feelings" and, "I am sure that is difficult," are often enough. Do not let "feeling talk" gravitate into talking about the details of the divorce, especially as time progresses. Rather,

provide reassurance that you love and care for the child, that families still love one another despite changes that happen, and that the divorce is not the child's responsibility. Recognize that the child's life will have injustices that neither they nor you can fix. Recognize also that a good friend and helper goes a long way in helping to cope with injustices. Finally, keep in mind that small-bite conversations are normal for kids. They may not stay on the subject long, and they may take more from the moment than you realize.

Divorce forces many transitions on a child. For example, their daily routines will change, their relationships with parents, siblings, and friends may become more fragmented as they move back and forth between two homes, family traditions will change, and for some children they may permanently move homes or schools. Many of these circumstances cannot be changed. The key is to take a three-prong approach:

1. Keep as many of the old routines as is reasonable and talk often about what has NOT changed.
2. Speak openly about things that will have to change and why. Allow children to participate somewhat in decisions related to what will change. Over time, stress associated with change will fade and the changes will become a "new normal."
3. Be consistent and trustworthy. Perpetual change is very damaging to children and adults. Work hard to make thoughtful decisions and stick with them for as long as it takes to work through difficult transitions associated with change.

Children of different ages will experience the divorce differently and as a result show different behaviors.

- ❖ **Younger children** may show increased dependence, worrying, separation anxiety, decrease of self-care, difficulty understanding that divorce is permanent, and wishful thinking. Adults in their lives need to spend more time with them, provide a lot of reassurance, focus on successful transitions, use positive reinforcement, and be consistent.
- ❖ **Older Children** may show an increased independence, increased anger, some rebellious behavior or defiance, distancing from family, withdrawal, and an increased value on their own self-interests. Adults in their lives need to keep family routines and traditions as intact as possible to allow for positive family time, allow the child some space but stay nearby, keep rules and expectations consistent, provide positive reinforcement for age appropriate independence and not allow parentification (where an older child steps into the role of missing parent at either home).

Parents need to consider taking specific steps on behalf of their children.

- ❖ Spare your child the inappropriate details of your divorce. Avoid put-downs or blaming of the other parent. Continued parental conflict has been shown to be the most damaging aspect of divorce to children long-term.
- ❖ Increase your time with and availability to your children. Find new routines and keep them *consistent*. You are rebuilding trust that may have been shattered.
- ❖ State more often that you love your child.
- ❖ Role model the appropriate expression of emotions and positively reinforce it in your home.
- ❖ Find ways for your child to have some control over their situation, especially related to transitions between homes, which is a particularly stressful time for all involved.
- ❖ Keep family members, teacher, friends, and neighbors informed and involved in your child's life.
- ❖ Finally, if you are not coping well with your own divorce, get the help you need.

Some children will continue to struggle with divorce. Some things that have proven effective are providing a journal to older kids or using art for younger kids to express themselves, reading books about children going through divorce, encouraging extracurricular activities or hobbies, divorce care groups, and individual or family counseling.

Stay positive and stay involved, and you are sure to make a difference!



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