



Helping Children Cope With Divorce or Separation

Separation or divorce affects each family differently—and it can be particularly difficult for children. This guide is intended to help you understand how it may affect your children and how to help them cope following a separation or divorce. *Note*—This guide contains basic information only; for specific advice on your family’s unique situation, consult with your pediatrician, child psychologist, family therapist, or other professional.

Talking to Your Children About Divorce

Once you and your spouse have decided to divorce or separate, you’ll need to explain the situation to your children. Although it is not always possible, it is usually best if you and your spouse tell your children about the separation or divorce together. If you have more than one child, tell all of the children at once. This may help provide a sense of support for each other. Reassure your children that both you and your spouse still love them—and that the divorce is not their fault. Additionally, consider the following tips for talking to your children about divorce. Keep in mind that you’ll need to tailor these tips to the age, maturity and personality of your children.

- Rehearse together in advance what you will say to your children and prepare answers to anticipated questions, such as, “Why don’t you love each other anymore?”
- Be honest. Children may understand more than you think. While it’s not a good idea to share the details of your marital problems, you might say, for example, “We have decided to separate because we don’t get along anymore. We have tried to work out our differences, but our relationship has changed.

“My wife and I have decided to divorce, but we are having difficulty telling our children,” says David. “How do we explain our decision to our six- and seven-year-old daughters? Also, my wife and I don’t agree on which custody arrangement would be best for the whole family. Any suggestions?”

We believe this is the best decision for the whole family.” Stress to your children that despite these changes, both you and your spouse still love them.

- Explain how the new situation will work. Many children, especially younger ones, will want to know how the divorce will affect them: who will take care of them, where they will live, where will the departing parent live, who will pick them up from school, etc.
- Allow plenty of time for questions and reassure your children that they can approach you at any time if they have more questions or want to talk later. Consider setting up a specific time to meet again in order to give your children time to digest what you have told them.
- Make it clear that your decision is final (if you have decided to divorce). Don’t provide any false hope that there is something your children could do to fix the situation.
- Continually reassure your children that you both love them.

How Divorce May Affect Children

Although divorce affects each child differently, there are some common childhood reactions to stressful family events:

- **Disorganization**—Children may have more difficulty following directions, sticking with a task, solving problems or exercising good judgment.
- **Regression**—Children may “take a step backward” in their level of maturity. Younger children may start bedwetting or using baby talk again; or may be more clingy.
- **Acting out**—Children may be more likely to be irritable or defiant, or throw tantrums more frequently.
- **Physical symptoms**—Children under emotional stress may complain of physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches or muscle cramps, or show changes in eating, sleeping or toileting habits.

To help your children through these symptoms of stress, be understanding and provide them with extra love and attention. If these symptoms persist, seek help from your pediatrician or counselor.

Helping Your Children Cope

Consider the following age-appropriate tips—for infants through teens—to help your children cope:

Infants and Toddlers

Children between the ages of birth and three will most likely not understand divorce, but may react to changes in their environment. For example, an infant who is used to being held and soothed by both parents will most likely miss one parent if he or she leaves. Also, babies may be able to sense stress or anger in the people around them. As a result, your infant may begin to react with fear or anxiety toward other people, or have trouble eating and/or sleeping. The following tips may help you soothe infants or toddlers during this time:

- Keep your children’s daily routine as consistent as possible.

- Make sure both parents maintain regular contact with the children.
- Be aware of how conflict in your household is affecting your children’s behavior, mood, and sleeping and eating patterns. Minimize the amount of conflict that your children see by avoiding fights while they are around.
- Spend more time with your children cuddling, reading or listening to music to ensure that they feel safe and secure.
- Keep all caregivers apprised of your family situation and ask them to inform you of any unusual behavior in your children.

Preschoolers

Children between the ages of three and five have a limited understanding of what divorce means and how it may affect their lives. Preschoolers are egocentric, meaning they are likely to believe that the divorce is their fault. Like infants and toddlers, preschoolers are sensitive to hostility and stress around them—and they can often be more sensitive to emotional clues. Preschoolers may act out or revert to babyish behavior when they feel stressed or insecure. Consider the following tips to help preschoolers adjust to the changes brought on by divorce:

- Communicate openly with your children about the divorce and encourage them to be honest about their feelings. You may discover that your children have come to false—and stressful—conclusions about why you are divorcing, what divorce means and what will happen to your family. Calm your children’s fears and correct their misperceptions.
- Look for changes in your children’s behavior. Aggression, anger, sadness and depression in your children may be clues that they are not adjusting well to the divorce.
- Maintain consistency and predictability in your children’s care arrangements and inform caregivers of your family situation so they can also watch for and be sensitive to changes in your children’s behavior.
- Seek help from your children’s medical provider if they exhibit prolonged changes in behavior or mood.

If you are having your own emotional difficulties, seek help from family, friends or a professional counselor. Since your children will most likely tap into the feelings you are expressing—verbally or otherwise—try your best to reduce this source of stress for them.

School-Aged Children

School-aged children may exhibit many of the same fears and anxieties that younger children exhibit. They may be afraid that you or your ex-spouse will abandon them—or that something they said or did caused the divorce. You may also notice that your children's academic performance or motivation is suffering during this period of high stress. Therefore, it is important to maintain open communication between you and your children. Consider the following tips for helping school-aged children cope with the divorce:

- Make sure children maintain frequent contact with their non-custodial parent.
- Monitor your children's schoolwork carefully and inform their teachers about the situation. Ask teachers to help you keep track of your children's performance, mood and behavior.
- Discuss custody arrangements with your children. This can help them feel like they have some control of the situation. (Please see the section, "Establishing Child Custody Arrangements," for more information.)
- Listen to your children. Chances are, the news of the divorce will cause a number of emotions in your children—anger, hurt, fear and confusion. Encourage them to talk to you about how they are feeling.
- Don't force your children to choose sides. They need to know you are both equally available—and that neither of you loves them any less.
- Like preschoolers, school-aged children may exhibit more aggression, anger or sadness during the divorce. Talk to your children and help them find appropriate out-

lets for their emotions. For example, have your children express emotions through art; role-playing; keeping a journal; playing or listening to music; or talking about their feelings.

- If necessary, have your children speak to a professional if their grief continues for an extended period of time.

Pre-Teens and Teens

Adolescent behavior can be particularly affected by divorce. Adolescents rely heavily on security and stability in the home as they develop their own sense of independence and responsibility. Teens who experience their parents' divorce may worry about their own ability to establish lasting relationships in the future. Adolescents may also exhibit anger or aggression, become depressed, or withdraw emotionally from family and friends. If you notice changes in your children's friends, activities or routine, it may be a signal that they are having difficulty coping. Consider the following tips:

- Talk to your teens about the divorce. Chances are, they have suspected problems in the family and may be keeping their stress and worries hidden.
- Keep your children actively involved in custody decisions.
- Be alert for at-risk behaviors in your teens, especially the use of alcohol and drugs. Teens who are experiencing extreme stress or emotional turmoil may be more tempted to experiment with risky behaviors. For more information on at-risk behavior, please refer to other guides in the LifeCare® Parenting series.
- Watch for changes in your teens' academic performance. A slight dip in school performance is normal, but prolonged difficulties may suggest a deeper problem. Talk to your children's teachers or guidance counselor if you suspect a problem.
- Seek help, if necessary. A professional counselor may be able to help your children cope with their emotions.

If you or your child is having difficulty coping with the emotional issues of divorce, seek help. Many employers offer an EAP (Employee Assistance Program) that provides free emotional support on a variety of issues. Ask your human resources representative if EAP services are available to you.

Establishing Child Custody Arrangements

Making child custody arrangements may be the most difficult aspect of a divorce. Unless one parent is considered unfit or dangerous to the children, custody arrangements should include frequent contact between the children and both parents. Consider the following tips for helping your children adjust to new custody arrangements more easily:

- Keep the custody schedule as predictable as possible. If there are going to be any changes in the arrangements, make sure that your children—and any teachers or caregivers—are informed ahead of time.
- Make sure the transition between your homes is as smooth as possible. Allow your children to bring favorite toys, books, games, etc. when they stay at your ex-spouse's home.
- Minimize your children's exposure to conflict between you and your ex-spouse. If you and your ex-spouse need to discuss unresolved issues, talk when your children are not around.
- Don't place your children in the center of any of your disputes or ask them to choose sides.
- Don't criticize your ex-spouse in front of your children.
- Encourage your children to maintain contact with your ex-spouse. Often during custody disputes, children can become upset or angry, especially with the other parent. As a result, children may express their anger by refusing to see that parent.

- Allow older children to have a say in when they see their other parent (within the boundaries of any court orders). Children often adapt better to caregiving situations over which they have some control. For example, during the preteen years, your child may decide that he or she would feel more comfortable living with the same-sex parent. If at all possible, try to accommodate your children's needs while staying within the rules of any legal custody arrangements.
- Keep in mind that holidays may be especially stressful for both you and your children. Try to maintain normalcy as much as possible and include time with both you and your ex-spouse in your children's holiday plans.
- Notify your children's teachers and/or guidance counselors of the situation so they can watch for signs that your children are having difficulty coping, and provide additional support.

If you and your ex-spouse cannot come to an appropriate child custody arrangement on your own, you may need to seek help from the family court. The court will determine a custody arrangement that is in the best interest of your children (based on the evidence presented by you, your ex-spouse and, possibly, your children). Throughout any court proceedings, be extra sensitive to your children's feelings. They may feel forced to take sides, so don't pressure your children or try to influence them in any way. Encourage your children to be completely honest about their feelings and provide reassurance that you will love them no matter what happens. For more information, please refer to *A LifeCare® Guide: Child Support and Visitation*.

Consulting a Mediator

If you have difficulty mutually agreeing about what custody arrangement is best for your children, consider working with a mediator who can help you and your ex-spouse work through your conflicts. A mediator is a professional who can help you and your spouse identify and resolve important conflicts about your child custody arrangements. Children may also be included in the mediated sessions, if and when appropriate.

Normally, mediation is not legally binding and your lawyers must review your decisions to ensure that both you and your spouse are being treated fairly. Mediation is typically less expensive than any proceeding in court and experts agree that children who avoid court litigation tend to have fewer problems adjusting to the arrangements. To find a mediator in your area, utilize work/life benefits through your employer (if available), or contact your local court office or Department of Children and Family Services.

Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children

No matter how well you prepare your children for your divorce—or how understanding they are of your decision—it's possible that there may be long-term effects of the divorce on your children. To help your children cope with feelings of anger, sadness and anxiety that may arise, consider the following tips:

- Recognize that your children may feel a great deal of separation anxiety due to the profound changes that occurred in the family. Younger children, especially, often fear that parents will abandon them or stop loving them. Reassure your children that you will always be there for them.

- Make sure that your children maintain close contact with both sides of their family, including grandparents and other extended family members. Children with a strong support system are more likely to feel secure and loved.
- Talk with your children. Your children might not bring up the subject, but if you do, they may be more inclined to discuss their feelings.
- Don't assume your children are adjusting well if they are not expressing any anger or sadness. Children often bury their feelings of anxiety and anger and express them through at-risk behaviors later in adolescence.
- Seek professional help if your children are having difficulty coping with the stress of the divorce or are exhibiting dangerous behaviors. For example, if your children are exhibiting intense depression, aggression or sadness, they may need the help of a professional counselor or mediator to work through their feelings.

Note—If you or your children have suffered abuse of any kind, seek counseling immediately. Find out if your employer offers any benefits (e.g., referrals to counselors or support groups in your area or EAP services that can provide access to a professional counselor).

If You Start Dating Again

The decision to begin dating again may not only be difficult for you, it can affect your children as well. Many of the emotions they may have felt during the divorce may resurface if you start dating again, causing stress, disappointment and confusion. To help your children adjust, consider the following tips:

- To avoid confusion, refrain from introducing all of your dates to your children when you first begin dating. But, make sure your children know how to contact you at all times.
- When you introduce a potential long-term partner, remember that your children may initially react with hostility toward him or her or, conversely, become quickly attached.
- If your children are upset or angry that you are dating again, be sensitive to their feelings. Set aside daily time to be with your children so that they feel less threatened by your new relationship.
- Be aware that if your new relationship ends, your children may become very upset—especially if they formed a relationship with your new partner. Explain in simple terms why the relationship ended and avoid blaming your partner.

Helpful Resources

Divorce Online

www.divorce-online.com/index.html

This web site is for people involved in, or facing the prospect of, divorce. It provides information on the financial, legal, psychological, and other aspects of divorce.

How to Divorce as Friends

www.divorceasfriends.com/

This web site provides helpful advice for healing from a divorce and ending the relationship amicably. It also includes helpful tips on parenting, resolving disputes, dealing with attorneys and more.

The National Family Resiliency Center

2000 Century Plaza, Suite 121

Columbia, MD 21044

410-740-9553

301-384-0079

www.divorceabc.com

This organization provides support to families who are coping with divorce-related issues. The web site offers articles, a bookstore, FAQs and more.

Smart Divorce

www.smartdivorce.com/

This web site offers free articles and an online newsletter on a range of divorce topics as well as a listing of local divorce support groups.

Suggested Reading

Helping Children Cope With Divorce, by Edward Teyber. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001.

This guide helps children cope with divorce by providing guidelines to help parents minimize distress, explain the divorce, tailor the custody and visitation plans, shield the children from parental conflict and more.

Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce, by Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan Berlin Kelly. New York: Basic Books Publishing, 1996.

This book profiles the impact of divorce on parent-child relationships, family finances, children's success in school and examines children's responses to the divorce, custody arrangements and their parents' new roles.

Difficult Questions Kids Ask—and Are Too Afraid to Ask—About Divorce, by Meg Schneider and Joan Zuckerberg. New York: Fireside Press, 1996.

In a question-and-answer format, this book provides parents with insight into what children may be thinking and feeling about divorce, how to answer your child's difficult questions about divorce, and how to keep the lines of communication open.

What About the Kids?, by Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakesley. New York: Hyperion, 2003.

This book provides information for parents on how to parent your child through a divorce, including chapters devoted to what you should say and do for children at each age and stage of development. Plus, it offers advice on choosing a custody plan that is best for your child, creating a healthy remarriage, and what to say to your children when they become adults.

Divorced but Still My Parents, by Shirley Thomas and Dorothy Rankin. Springboard Publications, 2001.

This book for children is designed to help them understand the feelings they may be experiencing during a separation or divorce. It also includes workbook activities to help kids aged 6-12 work through the grieving process that accompanies a divorce.

Mom's House, Dad's House, by Isolina Ricci. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

When divorced parents share custody of the children, providing two happy and stable homes can be a challenge. This guide provides parents with numerous options and ideas for how to make two homes work, creating a parenting agreement and long-distance parenting. It also includes self-quizzes and helpful checklists.

Parenting After Divorce, 2nd Edition, by Philip M. Stahl. Atascadero, Calif.: Impact Publishers, 2007.

This guide offers practical advice on how to make parenting arrangements work during and after a divorce. It focuses on resolving conflicts between divorcing couples utilizing techniques such as mediation, parent education and custody evaluations in order to best meet children's emotional needs. It also provides tips on children's developmental needs and how to talk to them about the divorce.

Speaking of Divorce: How to Talk With Your Kids and Help Them Cope, by Roberta Beyer and Kent Winchester. Minneapolis, Minn.: Free Spirit Publishing, 2001.

This easy-to-read guide for parents addresses some of the most common questions kids have about divorce and gives parents ideas on how to respond sensitively and truthfully. It also provides ideas for how to handle difficult situations brought on by divorce, including money matters, dating, holidays, etc.

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