

Helping Your Children

Cope with Divorce



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Divorce is never easy and this is particularly the case when children are involved.

For many generations, in fact, couples with children often avoided divorce entirely because of concern about how it might affect their children. This was often because parents were made to feel they needed to stay together for the sake of the children. The majority of people simply assumed that breaking up the traditional family unit would always cause more harm than good. Today, we know this is just not so.

In fact, what we know today is often the opposite. Numerous studies have shown that it is not a divorce itself that can harm children psychologically, but rather, the way that the parents choose to handle it. The truth of the matter is that two happy homes are better than one unhappy home, if the parents can approach the divorce and the change of circumstances afterward in a mature, cooperative way, with their children's best interests at heart.

Even when you put the focus on the children, it can be hard to know how to begin the process of talking with your children about divorce, or what to anticipate. We will provide information that we hope will be helpful to parents who are navigating this situation with their children. We know you love your children and want to help them through this difficult process in the best way that you can. That way, you can ensure your children are happy, healthy, and well-adjusted. Whether in one home or two, family comes first.

HOW DO I BREAK THE NEWS TO MY CHILDREN?

It's understandable to feel anxious when it comes to telling your children about your decision to divorce. Many parents feel unsure as to when and how to begin the conversation. The most important thing is not to let this anxiety prevent you from having the conversation at all. Some parents feel so worried about how to break the news to their children that they never sit down together and have a conversation about what is happening and why. As a result, there's no opportunity for the child to process the information and their feelings about it with both parents present to listen. It is vital that both parents make their best effort to listen, answer questions, and reassure the children that they are loved, and that they are still their parents' most important priority. Don't make the mistake of missing out on this conversation. As difficult as it may be, having this conversation is well worth it, and in the best interest of the children you love.

Once you've decided to have the conversation, it can be helpful to sit down with your spouse first and think through what you plan to say. This will give you a chance to discuss your responses to potentially tough questions and reactions, and to be certain that you're on the same page with respect to the important issues affecting your kids. Planning ahead in this way can reduce your own anxiety, and in turn, make the conversation a calmer, more productive experience for everyone.

Communication With Your Children

When having the conversation, you can follow some simple guidelines:

HONEST BUT AGE- APPROPRIATE

Your kids are entitled to know why you're getting a divorce, but at a level appropriate for their maturity. Providing long-winded explanations with too many details can be confusing. Instead, be simple and direct: "Mommy and Daddy can't get along anymore," or "Mommy and Daddy's feelings have changed since we got married, and we're going to live in different homes now. Our love for you will never change." Simple, direct, and honest is the best approach for everyone concerned.

DON'T BLAME

Keep the conversation simple and direct and remain calm. Don't point fingers at one another. Blaming one another is counterproductive and it only adds unnecessary stress and strain to an already difficult situation.

BE WILLING TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

Your children may have many questions as they process this news, and that's okay. Be willing to answer their questions honestly, but in an age-appropriate way as we've mentioned. Generally, younger children will need only simple explanations, while older children may need a bit more detail, though still at a level appropriate for their maturity.

PROVIDE DETAILS

Tell your children about the things in their life that may change – living arrangement, school, or activities – again, with a focus on being honest and not overwhelming.

EMPHASIZE LOVE

Last, but most importantly, it's very important to reassure your children that although you may have fallen out of love with one another, your love for the children will never change. Children need to know that regardless of whatever else may change in their lives (and divorce can bring significant change), your love is one thing that will remain constant.

While this conversation won't be easy, it will be worth it. Make sure your children feel loved, and listened to. It will be the first of many times on this journey that you'll need to show your children that no matter what else may change, their parents will always work together toward their best interests at heart.

HOW WILL MY KIDS REACT TO THE DIVORCE AND HOW CAN I HELP THEM?

All of us are different, and as every parent certainly knows, each child is unique in his or her own way. Accordingly, the way that children respond and react to a divorce will be varied and unique as well. Any number of emotions may arise – fear, sorrow, anger, anxiety, confusion, hyperactivity, or possibly a decreased interest in activities once enjoyed – all of these reactions are normal, and to be expected. Some children may feel guilty, as if they are to blame for the divorce, while others may even experience significant personality and behavior shifts. These reactions, too, are understandable.

Depending on the age of your children, certain reactions may be more common. Younger children may have meltdowns, or more frequent temper tantrums. Because they do not yet have sophisticated coping skills, these outlets are a common release for the volatile emotions they may be feeling. Even physical reactions, like headaches, or upset stomachs are not entirely uncommon in children of younger ages.

As children grow older, reactions can be quite varied – Some kids may become more withdrawn, while others become more prone to sudden outbursts and moodiness. Older children may spend more time with their friends in order to distance themselves from the emotions they feel at home, and may struggle with feelings of guilt, as well as feelings of anger toward one parent or the other in particular on any given day. While feelings and reactions vary by age group and based on each child's unique personality, the important thing to remember is that a wide range of reactions and feelings is normal, and okay.



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Different reactions will require different responses. As the parent, you know your children best and how to help them adjust to this significant time. As you try to do that, here are some tips for communicating with children regardless of age:

ACKNOWLEDGE AND VALIDATE THEIR FEELINGS

Simply recognizing what your child is feeling and acknowledging their right to feel that way is an important step toward helping your child cope with whatever emotions they may be having. Tell your children that what they feel is okay, and that you, too, have experienced similar feelings.

LISTEN

Sometimes, children don't need you to fix their feelings as much as they simply need you to listen. Just feeling heard is important, and it can have a healing effect. Let your children vent if they need to, and let them tell you their worries, fears, and concerns. Make it clear to your children that you're available any time if they need to talk. This simple openness to be available can make a big difference.

LAUGH

Make time to be silly with your children during the midst of this stressful time. Even though you may feel stressed out, anxious, and overwhelmed yourself, it is important to show your children by example that these feelings can't be allowed to control and dominate your day and your outlook. Make time to do fun things that your children enjoy, to spend time together doing favorite activities, and to bond over something fun together. For younger children, this may mean making a conscious effort to play together each day. For older kids, it may mean sharing a favorite activity together. Regardless, the important thing is making quality time a priority. Sometimes laughter truly is the best medicine.

REASSURE

Children often struggle with guilt during the divorce process. They may feel responsible for the divorce as if it is somehow their fault. It is important to continually reassure them that they did nothing to cause the divorce, and that your love for them remains the same, regardless of other changes in their lives.

The most important thing to emphasize is the consistency of your love and your commitment to helping your children through this difficult time. It may be painful to encounter mood swings and outbursts from your kids, or to feel that they blame you for the situation. It's critical, however, that you not take these reactions personally. Children need to know that what they feel is normal and okay, and that you will be there to help them navigate through these difficult emotions and feelings.

Part of successfully helping your children navigate their feelings may, at times, include reaching out to qualified counselors or therapists who can help them through this time. While there is certainly no substitute for the love and support of a parent, the truth is that sometimes, issues can be complex, and feelings can be difficult to manage. Connecting your child with a therapist or counselor who is professionally trained in helping children through difficult life transitions might be very beneficial for both you, and for your child.

In addition to seeking help from a qualified therapist or counselor, there are also a number of other resources, including age-appropriate literature that is written especially for the purpose of helping children process the feelings and changes that often accompany a divorce. Here are a few popular resources:

BOOKS

It Is Not Your Fault, Koko Bear by Vicki Lansky and Jane Prince: This book, by the authors of *The Divorce Book for Parents* Parents (another resource we recommend), this book offers children reassurances that the divorce is not their fault and that they will always be loved. It serves as an excellent guide with tips and advice on each page to help children through this transition.

My Family's Changing by Pat Thomas. This picture book for younger children explores the issue of divorce in a way that is easy for this age group to understand. The author is a psychotherapist and counselor who helps children face their fears, worries and questions when their family is going through a breakup. It also includes "What About You?" sidebars that appear with questions directed at the child. The questions encourage children to explore their own feelings about the situation.

Dinosaur's Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. This handbook for preschoolers through first graders is sweet, comprehensive, and includes a glossary and sections about why parents divorce and what life will be like now (including chapters on holidays, stepparents, and stepsiblings).



A Smart Girl's Guide to Her Parents' Divorce by American Girl Books. A wonderful resource for elementary-aged girls who need help in understanding divorce. This 120-page guidebook answers many of the questions commonly asked by elementary-aged children in an understandable way. Also includes quizzes, tips, and advice from real-life kids who have been through this transition.

What in the World Do You Do When Your Parents Divorce? A Survival Guide for Kids Kids by Kent Winchester and Roberta Beyer. This helpful guide, in Q&A format, is perfect for grade-schoolers and tweens. It answers many commonly asked questions in an age-appropriate way that is relatable and easy to understand.

I, Amber Brown by Paula Danziger. This wonderful fictional book for school children has a main character who goes through significant life changes when her dad moves back from New Jersey and begins sharing custody with her mom. Amber feels that half of her life belongs to her mom, and half belongs to her dad, and she tries to work through her feelings in a way that school-aged children can easily relate to.

Here are some helpful online resources too:

Little Children, Big Challenges: Sesame Street Divorce Resources for Parents and Children: This is an excellent discussion of divorce and the issues surrounding in a way that children can easily understand. [Click here to view.](#)

How to Tell Children About Divorce - An Age-by-Age Guide: A website with developmentally appropriate guidance for telling children about your divorce and working through this transition and their accompanying concerns together. [Click here to view.](#)

Our Family Wizard - An App for Organizing Schedules and Sharing Parenting Information: A comprehensive and thorough app for making co-parenting easier, by offering an interactive shared calendar, and a centralized place to keep important shared information, manage a schedule, and track and budget child-related expenses. [Click here to view.](#)

HelpGuide: Children and Divorce: This website includes comprehensive articles about a wide variety of issues that families with children face during the divorce process. [Click here to view.](#)

In addition to using resources like these and enlisting the help of a professional, children of all ages may also benefit from talking to and spending time with other adults like pastors, family members, friends, and coaches. Sometimes an outside perspective and a change of scenery, even for an hour or two can be exactly what's needed. Don't be hesitant to reach out to others for help when you or your child need it.

CO-PARENTING DURING AND AFTER A DIVORCE

Though your marriage relationship may have ended, your relationship to one another as co-parents of children you love will continue. In order to best help children through the divorce process and all of the changes that follow, it is of essential importance that they have the continual love and support of both parents, and that the well-being of the children takes precedence over the personal issues of the parents. Even for parents with the best of intentions, however, it can be difficult to know how to most effectively approach the co-parenting relationship.

With that in mind, here are a few helpful tips:



BEING PRESENT

Without question, divorce is painful, and chances are that you and your former spouse may have many ongoing issues to work through as you try to truly obtain closure. While this is understandable, it is important to make an effort not to allow those issues to prevent both of you from being present for the important milestones and moments in your children's lives. Having both parents present in their big moments will mean so much to your children, and this may mean putting your personal issues aside.

MOM'S HOUSE, DAD'S HOUSE

One primary component of successful co-parenting is working toward making each parent's house feel like a home. Even if one parent technically has primary physical custody, each parent should continue to make an effort that the children feel at home and at ease in each place. This means recognizing that transitioning back and forth between homes can be difficult and taking steps to acknowledge your children's emotions as they adjust to living in two homes. Trying to keep routines and schedules similar and familiar in both homes can be one helpful way to do this, as can allowing your children to make the space that they have in each parent's home special and personal. Consider allowing your child to pick

the paint color and decorations for his or her room, or otherwise personalizing the space that they have in a way that is meaningful to them. This can go a long way toward making the house feel like a place they can call home, and not just a place they visit. Perhaps most of all, it can be helpful to talk to your children about their feelings. Allow them to express how they feel about going from one parent's home to the other and what might help to make the transition easier. Acknowledging their feelings and emotions as valuable and legitimate is important.

ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION

Another important aspect of effective co-parenting is making every effort to foster open and effective communication between the child and each parent, regardless of which home the child is currently staying at. Encourage and reassure children that they can always talk to both mom and dad when they need to.

AVOID THE URGE TO COMPETE

Even though it may sound irrational on the surface, parents can worry that when they divorce, they will lose their children's love, or for some reason, that they will be loved less than their co-parent. This can lead to competition for the affection of the children, sometimes even when the parents don't consciously realize it. Don't allow these insecurities and irrational fears to alter your behaviors or parenting style. Avoid putting your children in a position to choose between parents, or to take sides. Your children love you and want to be close to both of you so make every effort to remember that and to act accordingly.

Treating one another with an attitude of cooperation and respect and following the above tips can be helpful to being a successful co-parenting team, but simply having a good attitude isn't always enough. It's also important to have a plan, particularly with respect to how to approach conflicts which will inevitably arise.

Treating one another with an attitude of cooperation and respect by following the above tips can be helpful for a successful co-parenting team. But simply having a good attitude isn't always enough. Have a plan, particularly with respect to how to approach conflicts that will inevitably arise. Some experts on co-parenting have suggested you consider post-divorce co-parenting like a business model. Just as business partners create contracts and agree to compromises, so must co-parents.

It can be very helpful for both parents simply to agree upon a few general rules for the co-parenting relationship. Depending on the nature of the divorce and how much difficulty parents have in getting along with one another, the agreement could be verbal, or written if a more specific commitment is needed. In either case, co-parents should discuss and agree on items of importance, to everything from visitation to snacks, after-school activities schedules, and bedtimes.

Parents should discuss and agree on what will happen if someone's schedule changes, if a parent relocates, or if one parent changes jobs, or eventually remarries. Once the agreement has been made, both parents should make every effort to respect and adhere to the agreement. Of course, life changes constantly, and as circumstances change, parents can always agree to change their agreement to fit their current life situation, as long as both agree that doing so is in the best interest of their children.

OTHER IMPORTANT LIFE CHANGES

As with so many life circumstances, one thing often leads naturally to another. It is no different with a divorce. Following a divorce, other significant life changes may occur in relatively short order. It can be helpful to think ahead about these potential changes, to help prepare your child if and when they occur.

DATING

Most divorced parents will end up dating after the divorce, and many will get remarried. While it is normal to want your children to be happy about your new relationship, this may not always immediately be the case, particularly if the new relationship begins quickly after the end of your marriage. Many experts recommend waiting at least a year following your divorce to begin dating. Additionally, it can be a wise decision to take some time before introducing your children to a new partner. As your children have already been through a difficult emotional situation, the timing of introducing them to a new person in their life can be important. When you do make the decision to introduce your children to a new partner, try to allow them to be themselves, and to react in their own way. Answer any questions

they may have, and acknowledge the legitimacy of their feelings, whatever they may be. Also, be certain to reassure your children that regardless of the new partner's presence in their lives, that person is not intended to replace their parent. It is important for children to feel reassured in the continual love and presence of all important people in their lives.

On the other side of the coin, if you are not the parent who has entered into the new relationship, you should still make every effort to help your children adjust as best you can. Even though this may be difficult and painful, it is often healthiest for the children in the long run, provided, of course, that the new person your spouse is dating is a healthy, well-adjusted person, and not someone who would pose any danger to your child. Though you may be tempted to speak negatively about your former spouse or their new love, doing so can be harmful to your children who may feel caught in the middle or uncomfortable around the new person. Feeling comfortable with the people in their home – regardless of what home they are in – is something all children need and deserve.

RELOCATION

Moving away can be one of the most difficult and contentious issues in a divorce. Nevertheless, it is usually the best step for a parent, as it may mean a better job, a higher income, or a much-needed fresh start. While it can bring many positives, relocation can also be difficult for all concerned. Moving to a new city, particularly if it is a significant distance from the home your children are used to can mean complicated travel arrangements, and longer periods away from your child than parents would likely experience if all continued living in the same city. Relocation can be hard for children who may have to spend their summers and holidays away from their home and friends. Children can also struggle with homesickness for one parent or the other, as well as feelings of missing out on whatever activities or events are happening when they are not at one home or the other. Try to acknowledge any feelings that the children have about these challenges, and to be willing to talk through those issues. It helps to talk to the children about what they will do at the other parent's house, and plan some activities for when they return. Most importantly, children need to know they are safe, secure, and loved—no matter what home they are in.

Parenting is the best, and hardest job in the world.

It can be difficult, even in the most perfect marriages. When dealing with a divorce, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed with the effort of balancing challenging circumstances with your desire to continue to be the best parent possible to the children you love. By planning ahead, working together, and putting your children's best interests first, it can be done successfully, and one happy home can become two.

We are here to help you handle your divorce proceedings effectively. We want you to know that you are not alone in this process. We welcome the opportunity to put our knowledge and experience to work for you. Give us a call today.

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