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September 2022

## Divorce and Children: Helping Kids Deal with the Effects



Divorcing parents want to reduce the impact on their children, whether the children are young or already adults. The best way to do this is to recognize how the divorce is likely to affect your children, and then take steps to alleviate their pain and uncertainty.

### How Divorce Affects Children

Researchers have filled volumes studying and analyzing the effect of divorce on children. Studies examining the children of divorce have found that most suffer a sense of loss that can manifest in many different ways, depending on the children's ages and unique personalities, as well as on how parents handle the divorce themselves.

Younger children may regress in areas such as sleeping and toilet training or throw more tantrums. School-age and teenage children may show symptoms of depression, rebel against discipline, or change their eating and sleeping habits.

Recent research has shown that adult children of divorce have higher divorce rates than adults with parents in stable marriages -- and even those who remain married report they have less trust for their spouses than people whose parents have remained married.

As a parent, you can take an active role in easing your children's pain and reducing negative feelings and behaviors.

### How to Help Your Children Cope with Divorce

The single most important way that you can help your kids during a divorce is to have a cooperative relationship with your ex and keep conflicts to a minimum. Especially if your kids are still young, it's important to reassure them repeatedly that you both love them, that the divorce was not their fault, and that they will always have two parents. It's also crucial to provide your kids with the practical information they'll want to know, like who will be driving them to school and where they will sleep.

But the proof is in the pudding. To provide them with the assurances they need, you will have to be a model of maturity. Here are some tips on how to do this:

**Process, don't vent.** You don't have to hide the fact that you are stressed or that the divorce brings up difficult feelings for you. It's fine to talk about those things in general ways, without burdening the kids with the details. In fact, airing some of these feelings and encouraging the children to reciprocate by sharing their own feelings may help them lose some of the fear and anger they may harbor about the divorce.

Even years after the divorce, make sure you are available to listen to your kids express their feelings whenever they want to talk. As they grow and develop, they may need new information or want to express differing perspectives. Depending on their ages and personalities, you may need to encourage them to continue to talk about their feelings about the divorce.

**Keep children out of the middle.** If the children are teens or even adults when you divorce, be especially careful not to drag them into the fray by confiding too many details or enlisting them as negotiators in your divorce. Be sure to address any nagging issues directly with your ex-spouse -- either alone or with the help of a mediator -- rather than using the kids as messengers or sounding boards.

**Keep free of venom.** Don't express bitterness towards your ex -- and don't in any way imply that your former spouse isn't a good parent or that your kids are wrong to want a relationship with their other parent. Instead, continue to support and foster their relationship in every way you can so that the kids can be free of guilt and ambivalence.

**Establish new traditions.** Remember that it isn't only young children who may feel a sense of loss around holidays and special times. Many adult children become angry and confused about losing family rituals (even if they once groused about them). Be flexible in establishing new traditions, especially around holidays and celebrations of special events, such as birthdays. Be sensitive about incorporating new individuals into family groupings and look for fun activities to help relieve stress and encourage building or rebuilding relationships.

**Be vigilant.** Divorce is stressful for kids of any age. Even if your child has generally had a positive spin on things, keep an eye out for rough patches. Arrange for counseling or encourage your children to seek help if you see serious signs of emotional fragility.

### **If Your Children Are Young**

If you have young children, your post-separation life will involve coordination and cooperation as parents. It's a good idea to anticipate parenting issues by spelling out guidelines and ground rules in a written parenting plan that goes beyond the cursory custody terms that might have been spelled out in a divorce agreement.

A parenting plan for young children of divorcing parents can cover:

- responsibility for medical and dental care
- the times your children spend with each of you
- holiday arrangements
- how to handle schooling, discipline, and extracurricular activities, and
- other specific issues that likely to come up, especially related to child-rearing.

### **If Your Children Are Adults**

Even adult children may face thorny issues when parents divorce, particularly concerning the changed relationship they will have with each parent. Just like younger kids, adult children often go through a sort of grieving process when their parents divorce -- complete with anger, confusion, and despair.

**Foster sibling bonding.** One unexpected phenomenon related to divorce is that it often brings adult children emotionally closer to one another, even if they were not close as younger children. Do what you can to foster such relationships -- and resist the temptation to view them as threatening or divisive. Realize that your children, with their shared past and experiences, are often natural sources of comfort and support for one another.

**Encourage them to seek support from outsiders.** The overwhelming emotion adult children report when they learn their parents are divorcing is loneliness. Support groups in which they can talk with those experiencing similar feelings may be especially helpful in easing this pain. A number of such groups operate online.