

Talking to Children About

Divorce

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Divorce doesn't come with a how-to manual. Divorce can be a challenging and painful transition that children experience differently than adults. The distress of the adults involved in a divorce can interfere with their ability to respond to their children and their children's needs. However, parents and caregivers can find the tools they need to help themselves and their children through the difficult transition of divorce.

What is Divorce to a Child?

The dictionary **defines divorce as the "legal dissolution of a marriage" that results in a complete or radical separation of closely connected people or things.** This definition barely describes the change, emotion or stress often linked with the divorce experience. For children, divorce is not just certain family members moving to different places, but a period of time that is filled with strong emotions and major family changes.

Divorce launches children into the experience of living in two worlds, the two worlds of parents who may have differing values, interests or ways of living. As much as possible, parents who can sustain some consistency (similar rules or expectations, etc.) for their children in between these worlds help their children adapt.

Yet divorce still means change for children, and change is difficult for most people. When seeking to understand a child's experience of divorce, adults must think somewhat differently and be aware of the topic from a child's point of view rather than an adult's perspective.

In divorce, adults typically deal with logistical or external decisions and issues, while children often face uncertainty, internal feelings and changes that result from the divorce process.

Some of the external issues that adults must face in the process of divorce are:

- Deciding where to live as a family member
- Planning what school children will attend
- Managing court processes and decisions
- Dividing up household property
- Providing for household expenses
- Giving sufficient and needed daily care to children

In contrast, children may face more internal issues that include the following:

- Grieving about the physical absence of a parent
- Coping with the stress of multiple changes at once
- Seeking some sort of control over the situation
- Accepting reassurance that they are not at fault for the divorce

Adults must understand that the issues occupying them may be quite different than the concerns of their children, and children of all ages need to hear that they still are loved despite the changes in family life.

Talking to Young Children (ages 4 to 8)

When talking to young children from ages 4 to 8, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Young Children

- Expressing fears of being alone (separation anxiety), unloved, abandoned
- Clinging, need for parental attention
- Tantrums, crying or irritability

- Anger or aggression toward toys, custodial parent (often mother), siblings or friends
- Negative behaviors or acting out (hitting, yelling, threatening, misbehaving)
- Acting out the situation in play (parents playing house, lonely child, etc.)
- Blaming themselves for the divorce, parent leaving
- Fantasies about parents staying together, idealizing the absent parent

Children's Responses to Divorce

A primary reason that children may struggle with the divorce process is that divorce introduces a set of changes that often are rapid, unexpected and unpredictable. It is not an “ordinary” process for children, and they often don’t understand all that is occurring. For any person, such a situation can be stressful, but it can be more so for children who have less experience and fewer coping skills or resources than adults.

Children might do one or more of the following things when responding to divorce:

- **Act out or have more behavior problems.** Parents may find children not listening to them, hitting or biting, being mean to younger siblings, talking back or being more disobedient than usual. These behaviors are often symptoms of frustration or anger about the situation.
- **Hold their feelings inside and avoid communication.** Children may push their feelings inward and act depressed. They may hope to avoid pain by not communicating about their feelings or withdrawing from others, including parents.
- **Blame themselves or feel guilty about the divorce.** Children are prone to assume responsibility for what is not their problem when divorce occurs, and so they may start blaming themselves.

Parents might hear them make comments or see their children feeling guilty; for example, identifying their own attitudes or actions as the reason for family difficulties.

- **Cry more often or become emotional more easily.** Temper tantrums or crying fits might be more common, as emotions are closer to the surface.
- **Let their school grades drop or fail to complete homework for school.** Some children find concentrating is more difficult due to the distractions of the divorce process and the related feelings. Adults might see children’s grades slip or notice less attentiveness to school work.
- **Express greater anxiety or fears about particular issues, such as separating from parents, being with unfamiliar people or feeling secure.** Children may have increased overall anxiety about performance in school, relationships with friends or family traditions and routines. Children need reassurance when they express anxiety.
- **Regress to past behaviors.** Children who are younger may regress to past behaviors, such as sucking a thumb, wetting the bed or not sleeping well at night.

Adults need to model good problem-solving skills, communicate with their children and express love despite the challenges of a changing situation.

- Withdrawal, lack of responsiveness, emotional distance
- Difficulty (often in school) with memory, staying on task, losing concentration, being distracted
- Regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, “baby” talk, etc.)
- Sleep or physical problems (disturbance of sleep, nightmares, stomach problems or other symptoms of physical distress)

What to Say and Do

- Hold young children and give them physical comfort, hugs and reassurance. Most young children naturally seek the comfort that comes from being held or hugged. Give children extra hugs, smiles and hand-holding. Set aside time to sit together, put your arm around them or hold them and talk about their feelings.
- Give verbal reassurance to young children. Tell them often that you love them, that everything will work out and that you will give them support. Also, listen and allow them to share thoughts or feelings and help them realize that feeling scared or upset is OK and can be worked out.
- Provide children with security through maintaining some consistent routines that are familiar to them (build on existing routines or establish new ones). This might mean consistent routines at lunch time, during an exchange or at bedtime. It might involve reading stories each night (whether with either parent), playing a game or having the same child-care provider. Keep a child’s routines as similar as possible, which helps build security.
- Discuss upcoming changes or schedules before they occur and show young children in concrete ways what will happen. Make a calendar with X’s on days with mom and O’s on days with dad so they can see what will happen, or do a paper chain to show how many days until they see the other parent. Young children struggle more if they are uncertain of what will happen next.

- Read books or watch shows that involve dealing with divorce or related issues together. Buy, check out or borrow books or movies that show children or families dealing with divorce and its effects (make sure they are age appropriate). Ask children what they think about the story or characters and how they respond. Compare your own situation.
- Give young children tangible items to provide them security. Let them have a picture of the other parent in their bedroom, a stuffed animal they take with them between locations or other concrete items that help them. Young children need to have things of their own that they do not “lose” every time they go with another parent.

Talking to Adolescents (ages 9 to 13)

When talking to adolescent children from ages 9 to 13, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Adolescents

- Feeling conflicted about loyalty to each parent, may take sides on issues between parents, may feel “stuck in the middle”
- Anger or aggression about the divorce, toward parents or siblings
- Feelings of being hurt, lied to or betrayed
- Sense of shame about family situation, concern about what peers think
- Confusion about who they are and where they fit in
- Manipulative behavior, playing “games” with parents
- Headaches or stomachaches if parents are in conflict
- Sleep or physical problems (disturbance of sleep, stomach problems, etc.)
- Negative behaviors, such as withdrawal, acting out, etc.

What to Say and Do

- Help children express and cope with grief, anger or feelings of concern. For children to sense and feel loss or anger is natural. Acknowledge the reality of their feelings and help them respond in appropriate ways.
- Avoid placing the child in the middle of conflicts. Do not make children an “ally” against the other parent and don’t use them to convey messages.
- Speak about positive aspects of the other parent. Avoid open criticism and help the child maintain a positive relationship with the other parent.
- Spend time individually with children to strengthen your relationships. Watch movies together, spend time talking, play games at home or go out to eat. Find opportunities for more connections and conversations.
- Keep your child’s activities normal by involving him or her as much as possible in regular opportunities, such as healthy activities, youth groups, sports, etc. Help them see that the focus of life does not need to be strictly on divorce all the time.
- Allow children to call the other parent, exchange messages or have a picture of the other parent with them (or in their room). This helps adolescents know you want them to have a good relationship with the other parent.

Talking to Teens (ages 14 to 18)

When talking to teens from ages 14 to 18, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Teens

- Feelings of anger about the divorce, toward parents or in feeling powerless
- May “grow up” more quickly, distance themselves emotionally from parents, become more independent
- Conflicted about loyalty to each parent
- Negative coping patterns may involve emotional withdrawal, depression or isolation, or

involvement in inappropriate activities (drugs, etc.) to “escape”

- Sense of a loss of “home” or family security
- Uncertainty about their own personal relationships, discomfort with parents’ new romantic relationships
- Increased sense of responsibility for other family members

What to Say and Do

- Be honest with teens to avoid feelings of distrust. Answer questions in a simple, straightforward way. Share information that is appropriate to the teen’s level of understanding concerning relationship issues or other concerns. Let them know they can approach you with questions.
- Avoid criticism of the other parent. Allow teens to work through their feelings about the other parent. Be careful not to undermine a positive relationship or encourage attitudes that will be destructive.
- Support your teen’s positive relationships with friends or peers and assist them in finding relationships with other caring adults who can talk with them about concerns. Family relatives, mentors or counselors can be a resource to help them talk about and deal with frustrations or concerns.
- Be consistent in your parenting and family rules.
- Provide a consistent and stable pattern of living for teens. Avoid enormous changes if possible, and support them in maintaining similar activities, having a regular schedule, etc.
- Reassure them of your love and ease any fears of being abandoned. Let them know you have not abandoned them. Provide regular support and listening. Tell them clearly that you love them and will be there for them.
- Assist teens in working through any concerns they have as puberty continues or they get into personal relationships. As they explore relationships, be supportive and help them overcome fears and doubts.

Difficult Issues for Children During Divorce

Children experiencing parental divorce may struggle to a greater degree if facing certain difficult issues. Difficult issues to consider and minimize are:

- **Taking on the parental role in the family** – Children might feel they have to take on the role of emotionally supporting a parent or giving primary care to a sibling, and thus changing family roles to be more like a parent than a child.
- **Being the sounding board for adult problems and issues** – Parents may describe their adult concerns and issues to children, putting kids in situations beyond their ability to understand or control.
- **Feeling rejected or unloved by one or both parents** – Children can feel abandoned by a parent who moves out of the home or stops being present in the relationship.
- **Assuming the role of protector for a parent** – Children might feel the need to protect one parent from the other, particularly if any type of abuse or violence is occurring.
- **Taking sides in the divorce fight** – Children may feel pushed to take sides in the divorce fight and view one parent as wrong and the other as right.
- **Losing time with parents, family members or friends** – Children may not be able to see or spend much time with a parent; relatives, such as a grandparent; or a close friend.
- **Fearing the loss of one or both parents** – Children may develop strong fears about abandonment or loss of both parents.
- **Meeting a parent's new relationship companion** – Children may feel anger, betrayal or grief when asked to meet a parent's new relationship partner.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that divorce is not an easy experience. It can be hard and challenging for children at any age. However, if parents commit to working through the process in a reasonable way, minimizing conflict and focusing on the needs of their children, reducing negative effects and helping children remain healthy is possible. No family is immune from the prospect of divorce.

For families that experience this change, talking about the experience and sharing feelings in an atmosphere of safety is one of the most important things for children. Some suggestions offered in this publication may apply to children of all ages. Parents and other adults should understand that children may experience divorce in different ways than adults involved in the process, and being responsive to their needs requires patience, awareness and understanding.

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