

Divorce and Children: Guidelines for Parents

More than a million children are affected by divorce each year. When parents divorce, it can be hard for children to get used to a new way of life. But parents can do many things to protect their children from the emotional harm divorce often brings.

Preparing for a Divorce

Tell your children about the divorce before the parent leaves. Be open and honest, but think about what they're old enough to understand. Children need to know what is going to happen, especially those changes that affect them directly. Tell your children where they will live and with whom, when they will see each parent, plans for school, outside activities and continued friendships. Let them know how and where each parent will live.

Children should not hear the other parent being blamed for the divorce. Don't give the message that one parent is "good" or "bad". They don't need to know details of what went wrong (such as affairs or money problems). Expressing these feelings places your children in the middle.



Picture 1 Let your children know that both parents still love them.

Coping with the Divorce

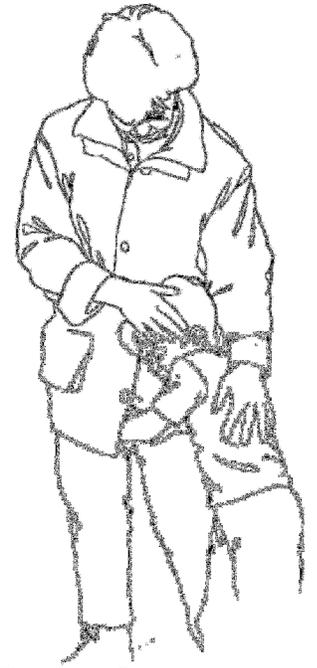
Once the divorce process starts, children may need more time and attention from both parents.

- Try not to let anger or legal battles make you overlook your children's needs. Parents should not argue in front of their children. This can make it harder for children to adjust after a divorce. Both parents need to be willing to compromise. Communication with your ex-spouse is important for the sake of your children.
- Try to work out, with legal counsel, acceptable visitation and custody arrangements. It's important for both parents to be actively involved in the financial, emotional and educational decisions that affect their children. Respect the relationship between your children and the other parent. Let your children spend time with their other parent without making them feel guilty or disloyal to you. Reassure your children you both still love them.

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Coping with the Divorce, continued

- Remember, the best way to help your children cope with divorce is help them keep a strong relationship with both parents.
- Keep your children's daily routines simple. Try to keep as many of their regular activities as you can. Many parents feel guilty that the divorce has upset their children so they find it hard to discipline. Your children may be angry or misbehave, but they still need to have limits set.
- It's important to be consistent: both households should try to set similar rules. This will help to avoid any confusion about what is expected.



Picture 2 Children may react with temper tantrums or "clingy" behavior.

How Children React

There is no "right" way for children to feel when their parents are going through a divorce. Here are some ways children may react:

Children under 3 years:

- Sadness
- Fearful of others, "clingy" behavior
- Temper tantrums
- Problems with sleeping, eating and toilet training.

School-aged children:

- Moodiness (sadness, anger)
- Temper tantrums or aggression (fighting)
- Lower school performance
- Worry about how to be loyal to both parents
- Strong wish for parents to get back together.

Adolescents:

- Depression, withdrawal, anger
- Aggression
- Engaging in risky behaviors (involved in sex or drugs).
- Worries about finances
- Trouble concentrating in school.

What You Can Do

- Tell your children that both parents love them.
- Make sure your children understand that they did not cause the divorce.
- Try to have as few changes as possible.
- Reassure your children that the other parent will visit. Children need ongoing contact with both their parents.

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What You Can Do, continued

- If the other parent is not involved, find substitutes such as relatives or volunteers from social service agencies.
- Help your children talk about their anger and sadness.
- Make it clear the divorce is final. Some children hold onto the hope they can get their parents back together.
- Do not ask your child to take sides. Your child should be able to love both of you.
- Keep consistent, healthy discipline in both homes.
- Don't argue in front of your children.
- Try to avoid custody disputes.

Outside Help

Social service agencies, mental health centers, family counselors and groups for divorced people and single parents are helpful. Books, articles and videotapes for both parents and children are available in the Nationwide Children's Hospital Family Library.

Other Resources

Nationwide Children's Hospital Divorce Services. Pre- and post-divorce counseling provided for both parents and their children. For referral, call (614) 222-1999 or for information, call (614) 794-2145.

<http://www.uptoparents.org/>

This site has articles for parents, a free online newsletter and information on how to encourage discussion.

<http://www.childrenanddivorce.com/>

This site has information and resources for parents to help children cope with divorce.

<http://www.divorcesource.com/info/children/children.shtml>

This site has information and resources about the feelings children might have about divorce.

<http://divorceandteens.weebly.com/>

A site made for teenagers dealing with their parents' divorce.

Parent Connection Line at (614) 224-CARE (224-2273) offers 24-hour support and information for parents.

<http://www.parentswithoutpartners.org/>

Parents Without Partners (PWP) is a support community for single parents and their children. This site also offers parenting tips. There are chapters inside and outside of Columbus.

<http://www.divorcecare.org>

You can put in your zip code and find a list of local support groups and resources.

<http://www.divorcesource.com/groups/ohio.shtml>

This site gives a list of divorce support groups.