

Divorce and Children: Guidelines for Parents

Divorce affects more than a million children in the United States 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

It is important that children are told about a separation once parents have been able to sort through the basic details and are sure that it will occur. If they can, both parents should talk calmly with their children at the same time.

- Be open and honest. Think about what children are old enough to understand.
- Children need to know what is going to happen. Most changes affect them directly.
- Tell your children where they will live and with whom.
- Tell your children when they will see each parent.
- Let your children know how and where each parent will live.
- Talk about plans for school, outside activities, and continued friendships.
- Reassure your children you both still love them.

Children should not hear the other parent being blamed for the divorce. Do not give the message that one parent is "good" or "bad." They do not need to know details of what went wrong (such as affairs or money problems). Talking about these feelings in front of your children puts them "in the middle."

Coping with the divorce

During the divorce process, children may need more time and attention from each parent.

- Communication with your ex-spouse is important for the sake of your children. Try not to let anger or legal battles make you overlook your children's needs. Both parents need to be willing to compromise.
- Work with legal counsel to agree on custody and visitation plans. It is best when both parents are actively involved in the financial, emotional and educational decisions for their children. Respect the relationship between your children and the other parent. Let them spend time with their other parent without making them feel guilty or disloyal.

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 fighting
- Lower school performance
- Worry about loyalty 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 focusing in school.



What you can do

- Assure your children that both parents love them. Keeping a strong, positive relationship with both parents helps children cope with a divorce.
- Do not argue in front of your children. Try to avoid custody or visitation disputes.
- Make sure your children understand they did not cause the divorce, and the divorce is final. Some children hold onto the hope they can get their parents back together.
- Reassure your child that the other parent will visit, if that is the case. Children need ongoing contact with both parents. If the other parent is not involved, find substitutes such as relatives or volunteers from social service agencies.
- Keep daily routines simple. Continue as many of their regular activities as you can.
- Many parents feel guilty if the divorce has upset their child. They find it hard to keep discipline. Your children may be angry or misbehave, but they still need to have limits set. Keep consistent, healthy discipline in both homes.
- Help your children talk about their anger and sadness.

Outside help

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

When domestic violence or child abuse has occurred, a parent might want to get professional support to think through:

- how best to talk with his or her children about what has happened
- a plan for any ongoing contact with the other parent.

Even when a family has been affected by family violence, children may still care deeply for the parent who has been abusive. Helping them to understand what is happening is very important.

Other resources

- **Parent Connection Line at (614) 224-CARE (224-2273)**
Offers 24-hour support and information for parents.
- **<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 about and resources for the feelings children might have about divorce.
- **<http://divorceandteens.weebly.com/>**
A site made for teenagers dealing with their parents' divorce.
- **<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.