

Divorce & Family Dynamic Changes

A Parent's Guide

Overview:

Divorce and family disruptions affect more than a million children in the United States each year. Parents who are getting a divorce often worry about the effect this change will have on their child. During this difficult time, parents' may be preoccupied with their own problems, but continue to be the most important people in their children's lives.

It can be hard for a child to adjust to a new way of life and they may have many mixed feelings about the change. Children are often confused and frightened at the threat of their security, or often believe that the conflict between their parents is their fault. However, we must remember that children are resilient and that parents can do many things to protect their child from the emotional harm divorce can bring.

How Children React:

There is no "right" or "wrong" way a child can feel when there is a disruption in the family but here are some ways a child may react:

Children Under 3:

- "clingy" behavior
- Fearfulness
- Sadness
- Temper tantrums
- Trouble sleeping, eating, or with toileting

School-aged children:

- Lower school performance
- Temper tantrums/fighting
- Moodiness
- Worries about loyalty to both parents
- Strong wishes for parents to get back together

Adolescents:

- Depression, anger & Withdrawal
- Engaging in risky behavior
- Trouble focusing in school
- Family worries, anxiety (e.g. finances)



The 5 Stages Of Grief In Children Experiencing Divorce



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1. Shock & Denial

Children often respond to divorce news with disbelief & denial as a coping strategy to temper emotional distress.

2. Anger

Children may experience anger due to lack of understanding of the situation.



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3. Bargaining

Children may attempt to reconcile parents, believing their actions can reverse the divorce outcome.

4. Depression

Children might withdraw and show sadness as they realize the divorce is permanent.



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5. Acceptance

Children start to accept and adapt to the new family dynamic, even if not happy about the divorce.



Preparing for a family change

How to Prepare:

Children should be told about changes once parents are able to sort through the basic details and are sure they will occur. If you can, both parents should talk calmly to the child together.

- Do not keep it a secret or wait until the last minute, children are much more intuitive than we think and will catch on. If they catch on before we tell them, they may feel more hurt.
- Keep things simple and straight-forward, be careful to not share more information than what your child is asking for.
- Think about what children are old enough to understand, be open and honest
- Children need to know what is going on, it affects them directly...tell them where they will live and when they will see each parent.
- Do not discuss each other's faults or problems with the child or in front of the child
- Talk about plans for school, extra activities, and continued friendships/relationships.
- Validate feeling and admit that it will be sad and upsetting for everyone
- Reassure them that the divorce is not their fault and that you both still love them.
- Let them know that you are both there to answer any questions and they can share how they are feeling about this change at anytime.

(Adapted from American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2022)

How To Help Your Child Cope with Divorce:

What you can do:

- Keeping a positive and strong relationship with each parent can help a child cope with a divorce, assure your child that both parents love them and are there for them.
- Some children hold on to the hope that their parents will get back together, make sure they know the divorce is final.
- Avoid conflict and arguing in front of the child, conflict in front of them can cause significant anxiety....be extra aware of your surroundings when you are talking about divorce. Children often make comments like "I heard my mom and dad talking in the other room and..."



- Children need ongoing contact with both parents. If the other parent is not involved, find a substitute as best as you can like another family member or friend.
- Keep daily routines simple and continue as many of their regular activities as you can.
- Keep consistent and healthy discipline and boundaries in each home. Many parents feel guilty about how the divorce is affecting the child and they find it hard to discipline or enforce house rules. Your children may be angry or misbehave, but they still need to have limits set.
- Help your child talk about their feelings by having them keep a journal, or doing daily check ins with how they are doing.

(Adapted from NSPCC.org, 2023)

Recommended Resources

- **Books:**

- For Parents:

- Parenting Apart: How Separated and Divorced Parents can Raise Happy and Secure Kids. By Christine McGhee
 - Divorcing With Kids: An interactive workbook for Parents and their Children. By Richard Sherman
 - The Parent's Guide to Birdnesting: A Child-Centered Solution to Co-Parenting During Separation and Divorce. By Ann Gold Buscho, PhD

- For Children:

- Two Homes by Claire Masurel
 - Dinosaurs Divorce by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown (ages 3-6yo)
 - My Family's Changing By Pat Thomas
 - What in the World do you do When Your Parents Divorce? A Survival Guide For Kids. By Kent Winchester & Roberta Beyer (Grade-schoolers and Tweens)

- **Websites:**

- www.uptoparents.org
 - www.childrenanddivorce.com
 - www.divorceandteens.weebly.com
 - www.divorcecare.org

- **Phone Parenting Apps:**

- Bright parenting
 - Parenting2go
 - HelloJoey
 - Family5 best of parenting