

Divorce and Children



Every year, more than 1 million children in the United States experience the divorce of their parents. Because the average divorce takes place within the first 7 years of marriage, many of these children are very young. For many children, divorce can be as difficult as the death of a parent. Children need the guidance, patience, and love of both parents to help them through.

Put your child first

How much a divorce will affect your child's life depends largely on how you and your spouse treat each other before, during, and after the divorce. Parents must work together to make the transition as easy as possible. Even though the marriage ends, your role as a parent continues. Set aside your differences and *put your child first*. Try the following suggestions:

- **Never force your child to take sides.** Every child will have loyalties to both parents.
- **Do not involve your child in arguments** between the two of you.
- **Do not criticize each other in front of your child** or when your child might overhear you. If this happens, explain to your child that when people get angry they sometimes say things that are hurtful.
- **Discuss your concerns and feelings with your child's other parent** when and where your child cannot hear.
- **Avoid fighting in front of your child.**

Help your child adjust

As a parent, there are many things you can do to help your child adjust to the changes in your family.

Talk with your child early and often

The earlier you tell your child what is happening and the more often you talk, the more comfortable he will feel. Also, allow your child to share his fears, worries, and feelings with you. This can help make him feel safe and special. When talking with your child about the divorce, follow these guidelines.

- **Be completely honest and open** about what is going to happen. Talk about the divorce in simple terms. For example, "Your dad and I are having some trouble getting along," or "Your mother and I are thinking we may need to separate."
- **Make sure your child knows the divorce is not his fault.** Also tell him that he can't fix the problems or make the two of you stay together. Reassure your child that you love him and will not leave him.
- **Try not to blame your ex-spouse** or show your anger. Explain that parents sometimes need to live separately.
- **Be patient with questions.** You do not need to have all the answers. Sometimes just carefully listening to your child is more helpful than talking. Following are questions your child might ask:
 - Why are you getting divorced?
 - Will you ever get back together again?

How children react to divorce

Reactions to a divorce can vary depending on your child's age, gender, temperament, past experiences, and family support. The following are normal ways that your child may react. If any of these behaviors become excessive, talk with your pediatrician.

Preschool-aged children may

- Be sad
- Be afraid of others
- Not want to be separated from one parent
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Have trouble with toilet training
- Have outbursts or tantrums
- Act more "babyish"
- Blame themselves for the divorce—especially children between 3 and 5 years of age

School-aged children may

- Be moody or angry
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Seem distracted and faraway
- Not do as well in school
- Have tantrums
- Revert to more immature behavior
- Be more aggressive or angry
- Express their sadness and wish for parents to get back together
- Worry they may be the cause of the divorce
- Worry about divided loyalty to their parents

Adolescents may

- Withdraw emotionally from family and/or friends
- Become aggressive or angry
- Engage in risky behaviors such as sex or use of drugs
- Try to become an adult and take charge of the family
- Worry about the financial effects of divorce on the family
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Feel depressed

- Where am I going to live?
- Will we have to move?
- Will I need to change schools?
- Was the divorce my fault?
- How often will I see Daddy/Mommy?
- Are we going to be poor?

Child support

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, millions of female-headed households do *not* receive child support. In some cases, one parent does not want money from the other parent. In others, the parent may not be able or willing to pay or perhaps cannot even be found. Many times the parent with custody simply does not enforce the child support agreement.

The financial burden of raising a child should not fall on one parent alone. Both parents have a financial obligation to their child. Unfortunately, even when child support is paid, money issues may still be a problem. Remember, if either parent uses money as a weapon, it is the child who gets caught in the middle.

Contact your state’s child support agency for information on what parents must pay for child support. If your child’s other parent does not cooperate, you may be able to take action to force payment. State agencies can also help if your child’s other parent has moved and you do not know where he or she is living. In most cases, it is often helpful to talk with an attorney.

For more information, contact
 US Department of Health and Human Services
 Office of Child Support Enforcement
 202/401-9373
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/

Reassure your child that he is safe and loved. If needed, don’t hesitate to get help from your pediatrician or a family counselor.

Allow your child to be a child

Resist using your child as a replacement for your spouse. Avoid putting pressure on your child with statements like, “You are the man in the family now,” or “Now I have to depend on you.” Children have a right to enjoy childhood and grow up at a normal pace. As they grow older, they will be able to take on more responsibility and help around the house. Don’t expect too much too soon.

Respect the relationship between your child and the other parent

It is important to let your children show their love to both parents. Unless your ex-spouse is unfit to parent, try not to let your differences keep your children away from him or her. Children should be allowed to spend time with their other parent without feeling guilty. Reassure your children that you both still love them even though they may only be living with one parent at a time.

Keep your child’s daily routine

Try to keep your child’s routine, friends, school, and environment as unchanged as possible. Schedule meals, chores, and bedtime at regular times so that your child knows what to expect each day. Parents living separately should agree on a set of consistent rules for both households. It is also very important to live up to your promises to visit or spend time with your child. A routine weekly or monthly schedule may be comforting to your child.

About custody

Custody can be one of the most difficult issues in a divorce. Today parents are able to work out a wide variety of custody and visitation arrangements.

Physical custody is where the child lives and can be split between both parents. *Legal custody* allows a parent to share in key decisions such as a child’s schooling, medical treatment, and religion.

Although mothers are still more likely to maintain custody, more and more fathers are now taking on this role. While there is no proof that one form of custody is better than another, all children need a stable place where they feel secure.

If you are having custody disagreements, consider calling a mediator to help settle them. Mediators can be found by contacting a lawyer or family court.

For more information

There are many excellent books available on coping with divorce for both you and your children. Here are just a few to look for at your local library or bookstore.

Preschoolers

- The Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families* by Laurence Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (Little, Brown & Co, 1988)
- It’s Not Your Fault, Koko Bear* by Vicki Lansky (Book Peddlers, 1988)
- Let’s Talk About It: Divorce* by Fred Rogers and J. Jkis (GP Putnam & Sons, 1996)

School-aged children

- The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce* by Richard Gardner (Bantam, 1970)
- How It Feels When Parents Divorce* by Hill Kremetz (Knopf, 1988)
- Why Are We Getting a Divorce?* by Meter Mayle (Crown Publishers, 1988)
- What Can I Do? A Book for Children of Divorce* by Danielle Lowry (Magination Press, 2001)

Parents

- Mom’s House, Dad’s House: Making Two Homes For Your Child* by Isolina Ricci (Fireside, 1997)
- Vicki Lansky’s Divorce Book for Parents* by Vicki Lansky (Book Peddlers, 2005)

Use help from the outside

Children often turn to neighbors, grandparents, and friends for comfort and attention. These relationships can offer support and can be very helpful to children as they adjust to a divorce. Teachers or school social workers should be made aware of a divorce so they can let you know if any problems arise in school. It’s also important for your child’s school to know whom to contact for permission for special activities or in an emergency.

Divorce is not always easy for parents either. Don’t be afraid to see a counselor if you are having trouble adjusting to a divorce. It is important for parents to stay healthy so they can be available to their children during this difficult time. Social agencies, mental health centers, women’s centers, and

support groups for divorced or single parents are helpful. There are also many informative books and articles about divorce for both parents and children (see "For more information"). Your pediatrician is very aware of the effects that separation and divorce may have on emotions and behavior. He or she can help you find ways to cope with the stress you and your children are feeling.

Listing of resources does not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of the resources mentioned in this brochure. Phone numbers and Web site addresses are as current as possible, but may change at any time.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

