

Helping Children Cope with Divorce

Divorce is stressful for everyone. It can be very hard to tell your children what is happening. But it is best to tell them what is happening and answer their questions. If children are young, tell them in very simple words. Talk about how the divorce will affect their lives every day. Older and younger children will have different questions. Keep your answers simple, and listen to their concerns. You may need to explain things again and again. They might have new questions as time goes on. Keep answering their questions. This may help them feel better.

What to tell your children:

1. **Divorce is not their fault.** Some children think that they did something wrong and caused the divorce. They think it happened because they were bad. A child may think that Dad left because the child did not do well at school. Children need to be told again and again that the divorce was not their fault.

2. **Divorce is final.** At some ages, children might make up stories about their parents getting back together. It is OK for children to pretend. But explain that you are separated. Children need to know that they cannot fix the marriage. Make it very clear to children that they cannot make you and your partner get back together. This will help children accept other changes connected to the divorce.

3. **You love them.** Tell them your love for them has not changed. Help children understand that the love shared between a parent and a child is special. It is different from the love shared between a husband and wife. Husbands and wives might get divorced. But parents cannot divorce their children. Children need to know that your love for them will not end.

4. **Sometimes it is hard to have two parents living apart.** Remember that divorce can be confusing for children. Tell them you know it is hard when two parents live in different places. It is hard to love two parents who do not love each other. The children may feel caught in the middle. Tell your children that it is OK to love both parents.

5. **You want to hear what they think about the divorce.** Give children time to think about the divorce and the changes it may have brought about. Listen when they are ready to talk. Let them talk about their fears, concerns, and feelings. Answer their questions seriously

and LISTEN to what they say. Do not expect to do this one time and be done. Talk whenever things change or the child has questions or worries. Children will want to talk about different things as time goes on. They will think of other questions. Children need to know that you want to help them.

6. **All feelings are OK.** Children may have many different feelings about the divorce. They may feel angry with the parent who left. They may be happy about going on special outings with one parent. They may feel very sad. They may feel all of those things at the same time. It can be hard to have lots of different feelings at once. Children also may have different feelings on different days. Let them know their feelings are OK.

7. **They are not alone.** Children may feel that no one understands them. It may seem that everyone else is doing well. Help children understand that they are not the only ones feeling sad. Let them talk with other children who have lived through divorce. They can learn some new ways to cope. Children may think their parents are doing fine, but sometimes you feel sad too. Do not expect your children to solve your problems. But you can talk about your feelings with your children. You can tell them that you feel sad, angry, or worried sometimes. Tell them when you feel happy and excited, too.

8. **Different people have different feelings.** A child may not understand why you are happy about the divorce. Grandma and Grandpa may feel worried. An older child may be relieved that Dad does not live at home any more. The young child may feel sad or hurt. Explain to the children that it is all right to have feelings that are different from other people's feelings. It is normal to have different feelings on different days, too.

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Other ways to help your children:

1. **Make your home a caring place.** Conflict and arguments scare children. Work with your ex-partner to make decisions about the children without fighting. This will help the children to know they are important to both parents. Try to say good things about the other parent. If you cannot say good things, try not to talk at all about him or her. Remember, your child loves you both and wants affection from both parents.

2. **Provide stability.** Changes are hard for everyone, including children. Try to keep many things the same. This gives comfort to children. If you have to move, try to keep the same childcare arrangement or school, if you can. If you move, try to decorate the new home the same as the old one. When a lot of things are changing, it is scary. Keeping many things the same makes the child feel safer.

3. **Be patient with your children.** Divorce is a really big change. Many of the changes in divorce are confusing to children, so they get in trouble more. They may also lose some skills that they had before. For example, they may start sucking their thumbs again or lose their toilet-training skills. These reactions are common. Be patient. Children will slowly re-learn their skills. Keep the rules consistent. Over time, children will stop getting in trouble so often.

4. **Take care of yourself.** Get the support that you and your children need. It is OK to ask friends to help you out. Sometimes you may need to talk to someone about your feelings. Take the time to go out with a friend. If you take care of yourself, your children will cope better. Let children know that other adult friends or relatives can comfort them, listen to them, and support them. You do not need to do it alone.

Books to read with your children:

It can be very hard to talk to your children about divorce. Books can help. Here are some helpful titles.

- ***It's Not Your Fault, KoKo Bear***, by Vicky Lansky (1998). Book Peddlers. (For ages 3-5)

- ***Mama and Daddy Bear's Divorce***. by C. M. Spelman, (1998). Albert Whitman and company. Martin Grove, IL. (Ages 3-8)

- ***When Mom and Dad Separate: Children Can Learn To Cope With Divorce***. by M. Heegaard (1991). Woodland press, Minneapolis, MN. (Self-help activity guide for talking with children about divorce.) (Ages 4-10)

- ***Dinosaurs' Divorce: A Guide For Changing Families***, by Laurene Krasney Brown and Marc Brown, (1986), Little Brown and Company. (For ages 6-12)

- ***How Do I Feel About: My Parents' Divorce***, by Julia Cole (1997), Copper Beach Books. (For ages 6-12)

- ***At Daddy's On Saturdays*** by L. W. Girard (1987), Albert Whitman and company. Martin Grove, Illinois. (Ages 6-12)

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