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**Divorce  
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# **Divorce & Child Care**

**How to Tell Your Children You’re Getting a Divorce**

**11 Rules for Helping Your Child Deal with a Divorce**

**Protecting Children from Conflict**

**Making Your Child Comfortable in Two Homes**

**Children and Divorce**

**Here’s What You Need to Do for Your Teens**

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# How to Tell Your Kids That You're Getting a Divorce



## Veer

Telling your kids about your pending divorce may be the most difficult conversation you'll ever have. Even if the announcement isn't a huge surprise -- perhaps you're already separated or you've been arguing constantly -- it's only natural for children to want their parents and their family to stay together. Having to dash that dream is tough. "This is a conversation that children will remember for the rest of their lives," says M. Gary Neuman, author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce*. There's no perfect way to break the news, but these tips can alleviate some of the sting.

**Present a united front.** You and your soon-to-be-ex should sit down with your children together and explain the situation. Even if the divorce isn't a joint decision, it's best to present it as such and to incorporate the word "we" as much as possible when explaining the decisions that have been made. "This is not the time for accusations or bitterness," says Judith Ruskay Rabinor, Ph.D., author of *Befriending Your Ex After Divorce: Making Life Better for You, Your Kids and Yes, Your Ex*. "This isn't about you; it's about your children's emotional well-being." Besides, kids need to feel confident that their parents can still work together as a team to parent and guide them.

**Address the entire family.** Experts agree that it's best to have this conversation with the entire family present and then to follow up with each child separately. But if you're concerned that your older child is going to take the news hard or that her reaction will upset a younger child (after all, a school-age child understands the concept of divorce more than a toddler or preschooler does), you and your spouse may want to talk to each child individually.

**Plan what you'll say.** This is not the sort of conversation that you improvise. Dr. Neuman advises couples to come up with key messages that they think are important for their kids to hear. For instance, parents could take turns covering these important points:

- "You know that Mom and Dad have been having problems. We've tried to fix this, but things aren't working out."
- "We both love you very much. Nothing will ever change that love or the fact that we will always be here for you."

- "We will always be your mom and dad. But we aren't going to be husband and wife any more. Your dad [or mom] and I are getting a divorce."
- "You are great kids. It is our fault that this is happening -- not yours."
- "Even though things are going to change, we will always be a family."

**Expect a mixed bag of reactions.** Dr. Rabinor braced herself for lots of tears and questions when she and her former spouse told their then 8-year-old daughter about their plans to divorce. She was taken aback when the first question her daughter asked was, "Am I still having a birthday party?" But kids are innately egocentric, so it makes sense that their primary concerns are how this decision immediately affects their lives. "It's normal for children to be concerned about whether they have to switch schools or soccer teams, or if their friends can still play at the other parent's house," Dr. Rabinor says. It's also normal for them to cry, yell, retreat to their rooms, and slam doors. You know your child best. Read her cues to determine if she needs space and time for the news to sink in or whether she needs a reassuring hug.

**Be open to questions.** It will take time for your children to process how they feel. You should expect to have many more conversations with them as the separation and divorce proceed. "This first discussion is really a door opener to ongoing dialogue and questions between parent and child," says psychologist William Doherty, Ph.D., director of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul. Both you and your spouse should be open to answering questions and responding to your children's emotional needs. Be honest with them about what you know and what you don't know.

# 11 Rules for Helping Your Child Deal With Divorce

## Introduction

The scene plays out all too often. Sandy's 9-year-old daughter eagerly waits by the window, bags packed. But after 20 minutes, maybe an hour, it becomes obvious her father is not showing up -- again. She begins to cry. "He's not here because he doesn't love me!" she yells, then storms up to her room and slams the door.

"It breaks my heart to see her so hurt," Sandy says. "I don't want to bad-mouth her father, but I can't explain his actions either. I feel helpless, and then I get angry. When I confront him and she hears us fighting, it makes an already bad situation worse. I have no idea what to do." When an ex is unreliable, it can be frustrating and painful for both you and your children. However, there are subtle ways in which the parent who has custody can disappoint the kids as well -- and even contribute to the other parent's lack of commitment. While you can't make your child's hurt go away, you can help him cope with the various disappointments divorce brings. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind.

### 1. Make it clear your child is loved.

When a parent regularly doesn't come through, kids assume that they are somehow to blame. If only they were more fun or better behaved, they believe, then surely their parent would want to be with them. As a result, self-esteem can plummet, notes Edward Teyber, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at California State University, San Bernadino, and author of *Helping Children Cope With Divorce*. You need to continually reassure your child that the other parent's lack of commitment has nothing to do with her "lovability." If, say, your daughter's father failed to show up, you might tell her, "Even adults make big mistakes, and sometimes they hurt the people they love. Canceling at the last minute -- even when he knows that the visit means so much to you -- is wrong. But it doesn't mean you're not loved."

### 2. Don't sugarcoat the situation.

If you make excuses for the other parent, it cuts off your child's chance to express himself. "If a parent cancels because of a bad cold but went to work that day with the same cold, it's important that your child feel free to voice his feelings," says therapist M. Gary Neuman, creator of the Sandcastles Divorce Therapy Program and author of *Helping Your Kids Cope With Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. Let your child vent without your criticizing or apologizing for the absent parent.

### 3. Have an alternate arrangement.

If your ex is often a no-show, have a backup plan whenever your child is supposed to see the parent. Whether it's a playdate or a special activity with you, a fun outing diverts the potential letdown. Agree on how long you'll wait for the pickup or the phone call, and then get on with your day. You might say, "Let's wait for half an hour, and if Mom isn't able to come, we'll head out to the mall." If Mom doesn't show, let

your child know you can hear her disappointment without judgment ("I understand it may be sad when Mom doesn't come to get you on time"), and let your child respond.

#### **4. Encourage your child to communicate.**

You can persuade kids 10 and older to talk to the other parent about his lack of follow-through. "Expressing themselves gives kids a sense of empowerment and can help ease their frustration," Neuman says. "Even if nothing changes, your child will feel better knowing he made an effort to remedy the situation." Talk to your child about voicing disappointment without lashing out in anger. He might say "I miss you," "It hurts my feelings when you cancel," or "I'm embarrassed when everyone's mom and dad is at the game but mine." If he's uncomfortable talking about the issue, suggest he send a letter or an e-mail.

#### **5. Be willing to alter the visitation schedule.**

"Of course, consistency is important, but some flexibility on your part can increase an ex's ability to come through," says David Knox, Ph.D., author of *The Divorced Dad's Survival Book: How to Stay Connected With Your Kids*. If certain days or times are continually missed, for example, you might say, "If Tuesday dinners aren't good, what would be better?"

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#### **6. Get others involved.**

Attempt to include other reliable, caring adults in your child's life. Not only are devoted family members and friends role models your child can depend on, but their commitment takes pressure off you.

#### **7. Don't fight in front of your kids -- period.**

Heated conversations regarding unreliability or finances should take place on the phone when your kids aren't around. Research has found that the most poorly adjusted kids of [divorce](#) are those exposed to ongoing parental battles. "No one is saying you have to be best friends," Dr. Teyber says. "Some couples simply can't get along or trust each other and aren't likely to. But for your children's sake, you must stop fighting in front of them."

#### **8. Aim for peaceful transitions.**

Even if you're not openly argumentative, kids can sense tension and become anxious themselves. According to Dr. Knox, research shows that many fathers avoid visiting their children simply because running into their exes becomes too much of an ordeal. "Some dads complain that they just can't handle the conflict when seeing their former spouse," he says. "Or a dad arrives to a clearly anxious child and assumes his ex has been bad-mouthing him. The father ends up rationalizing that it's better if he doesn't come at all." No matter how upset or angry you feel, be civil. If you truly can't, it might be best for your ex to collect your child from neutral ground -- at a friend's, at school, or at a McDonald's -- and you can leave for your car when you see him drive in.

### **9. Say goodbye with a smile.**

When your child does go off to be with the other parent, make it clear that you're happy she's spending time with him. Mothers can unconsciously make their child feel guilty about leaving. "If a child sees her mom is upset when it's time for her to leave, she won't be able to have a good time with her father," Dr. Teyber says. Let your child know she doesn't need to worry about you. This will help your ex feel less tense about pickups too.

### **10. Send the right welcome-home message.**

Parents are often unsure what to say when their kids come home from an ex's house. They don't want to seem disinterested, yet they're concerned about appearing too inquisitive. To play it safe, they may say nothing. "This silence unconsciously sends the message that you're either unhappy, disapproving, or uncomfortable with the time he spent with his other parent," Neuman says. "Or it makes the child feel as if the visit has betrayed you in some way." How to best handle their return? Pretend your kids came home from a weekend at their grandparents' house. Be interested and supportive.

### **11. Allow kids to express disappointment.**

Don't downplay your child's pain and sadness. While done with the best intentions, telling kids comforting things like "It's better this way" and "Don't worry, everything will be fine" sends the message that you can't deal with your child's unhappiness, or worse, that he shouldn't feel that way. "Whether he's upset about the divorce in general or about something more specific, like a parent's having to work late again, anger and disappointment are normal, healthy emotional reactions," Neuman says. "A child is entitled to these feelings and should be able to talk about them without worrying that his parents will be upset or angry." Offer your support and comfort by letting your child know you understand -- and that his feelings matter. "Then he'll be free to confront disappointment rather than avoid it," Neuman says. "This will serve him well throughout his life."

# PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM CONFLICT

It's impossible to avoid conflict completely, but you *can* learn to control it. Here are nine useful tips for reducing the harmful effects of conflict during and after divorce.

By Donald A. Gordon (Ph.D.) and Jack Arbuthnot (Ph.D.)



**T**here are several things parents can do to protect their children from conflict and reduce the harmful effects of long-term conflict during and after divorce. Some solutions require the aid of others, including the court. A parenting coordinator can help work out a plan as well as reduce conflict between co-parents.

**1. Remove the Cause.** Obviously, this is the best course of action, but it may require counseling or therapy. You

need to examine your own role in feeding conflict; if there's nothing you can do to end the dispute, you need to structure your life to decrease the violence. You should avoid fighting and playing mind-games. Children copy their parents' behavior: they can become aggressive and show poor control of emotions.

**2. Learn New Skills.** Often, just going to a class will motivate parents. They will learn about the harmful effects of conflict. Hopefully, they'll

want to change – but to change, they must learn new skills. They must learn how to communicate without causing anger and how to listen to what is being said without judging. Parents need to work together and cooperate for the child's sake. Books or videos about divorce and parenting can also help, and parenting skill classes are offered in many communities. These skills will help with many aspects of raising children post-divorce.

**3. Keep Children Out of the Middle.** Parents need to keep their child out of their disputes. Being caught in the middle between Mom and Dad is very stressful for children: the most powerful reason for a child to be maladjusted is conflict between the parents. Parental disagreements cause stress and suffering in a child; children often emerge in good shape from low-conflict break-ups, and they do better than those in an intact family with high conflict. Parents in conflict are poor role models, inconsistent with discipline, and inattentive – all of which creates stress for their children. Negative emotions between co-parents are carried over into their interactions with their children. After the conflict, parents are suffering, too; involvement with their child decreases and they cannot respond to their child's emotional needs.

**4. Control Your Emotions.** Many parents go through regular cycles of emotion, from conflict to detachment. Feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment come and go – as do sadness, loneliness, and despair. Feelings of love, anger, and sadness have different effects, and some parents get “stuck” in one of these three feelings. Parents stuck in anger may endlessly seek revenge; those stuck in love may continue to hope to reconcile; and those stuck in sadness may become depressed, blaming themselves for all of the problems of the marriage. Parents need to learn to use non-violent language; most people respond well when given a positive message (something to do) and poorly when given a negative message (not to do something). *Nonviolent Communication*, by Marshall Rosenberg, explains this strategy (see the Center for Nonviolent Communication at [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)). Good communication skills enable parents to react less emotionally in tense situations.

**5. Prepare for Long-Term Conflict.** Disputes continue for a long time post-divorce for most families, so parents should develop a plan that shields the

child from conflict. The child will benefit if kept out of parents' angry arguments. Co-parents should work hard to maintain their own and the other parent's bond with the child, and they need to accept each other's different values and parenting styles.

**6. Contain Your Anger.** Being cordial and formal will help keep your emotions in check. High conflict is usually temporary, so it is best not to decrease the child's access to the other parent; it is more harmful for a child to lose a relationship with a parent than it is for them to be exposed to conflict for a short period of time. Decreasing contact between one parent and the child can lead to complete loss of contact over time, and children *never* get over the loss of a parent relationship – even as adults. There are good online programs that can help, such as Children in the Middle ([www.divorce-education.com](http://www.divorce-education.com)); parents can also work with a therapist



Parents in conflict are poor role models, inconsistent with discipline, and inattentive – all of which creates stress for their children.

or counselor. Mediators can also help reduce conflict by teaching parents to find ways to cooperate and agree.

**7. Children as a Cause of Conflict.** Sometimes, a child can make the fighting between parents worse. If a child has serious behavior problems or emotional problems, it adds to the burdens of the parents. If parents have trouble handling these issues, conflicts can arise or be aggravated. Of course, the child's problems may be caused by the break-up or by the parents' conflict; it can be difficult to know just what is causing what. The best solution is for the parents to agree on how to deal with the child's problems: they need to be consistent across households, and they should support each other in front of the children.

**8. Avoid Loyalty Conflicts.** Loyalty conflicts, where a child feels pressure to choose sides, are the most damaging aspect of parental conflict. Most parents do not think they put their child in the middle of their dispute, but children say that they do. Some parents criticize the child for not hating their other parent, or act hurt when the child wants to be with their other parent. A child may not be allowed to talk about the other parent or to bring things back from the other house. The child may be quizzed about time spent with his/her other parent or about the other parent's personal life.

A child will try to resolve loyalty conflicts in several ways, including:

- having a separate but equal connection with each parent
- trying to get the parents to be nice to each other
- acting out, getting into trouble, or getting sick
- becoming angels
- retreating from both parents and turning to their peers
- seeking comfort in alcohol, drugs, or risky sex.

Being caught in the middle is too great a burden for most children. The video, *Children in the Middle*, teaches parents to reduce the number of loyalty

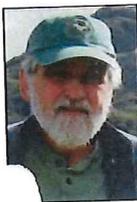
conflicts and the number of times the child is exposed to their arguments. The child learns to speak up when caught in the middle of parental disputes.

**9. Arguing Constructively.** It is impossible to avoid conflict completely, but you *can* learn to control it. Controlled conflict often leads to positive, constructive changes. Parents can learn to manage conflict, learn to compromise, and become more effective parents. When they do this, their child's behavior improves. ■



*This article was adapted with permission from What About the Children? A Simple Guide For Divorced/ Separated And Divorcing Parents (CDE, eighth edition, 2011) by Donald A. Gordon (Ph.D.) and Jack Arbuthnot (Ph.D.). Based in Athens, OH, the Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is a non-profit corporation founded in*

*1987 by a consortium of attorneys and psychologists. The CDE is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation has on children.*  
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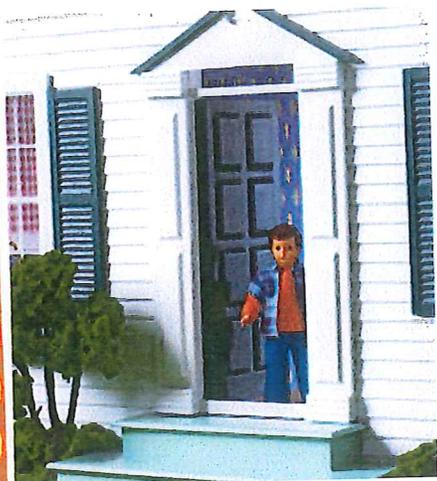
## TIPS FOR KEEPING KIDS OUT OF THE MIDDLE

- A child should not carry messages between parents.
- A child should not hear you "trash" or "put down" their other parent.
- Do not ask the child to confront the other parent about money issues.
- Do not quiz the child about the other parent's private life.
- Do not burden a child with parents' emotional needs and weaknesses.
- Do not force a child to choose which parent attends special events. (In most cases, both should attend.)
- Do not threaten that a child will not have access to one of their parents.

## TIPS FOR ARGUING CONSTRUCTIVELY

- Let out only part of your anger.
- Don't heap one stored-up frustration on another. Strong hostility will be returned.
- Don't hold all your anger in; it will come out in other ways. Instead, tell your ex what you are angry about.
  - Tell them in the form of an "I" message and ask for a change. For example, sometimes the other parent is late with the child. You might say, "I feel worried when you don't call if you're going to be late. I'd like you to be on-time in the future, or call me if a late arrival can't be avoided."
- Avoid name-calling and blame. Instead, say what you want or need.
- Resolve arguments. Apologize or compromise so the anger subsides.
- A child benefits from seeing conflict resolved through talking; they will learn to do the same in their lives.
- When conflict is resolved out of the child's view, explain the solution to them. Children need to see conflict be resolved (or at least hear about the resolution). This will help erase the negative effects of the conflict.

## Making a Child Comfortable in Two Homes



Peter Ardito

Having two places to call home -- Mom's and Dad's -- can be confusing to children, especially when a family is in the early stages of a separation or **divorce**. "Moving from household to household means change, and kids are not known for welcoming disruptions to their routines," says William Doherty, Ph.D., director of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul. Then again, a child also has the excitement of a new home, a new bedroom to decorate and a new neighborhood to explore. Whether you're setting up a new address or maintaining the present one in the midst of your separation or divorce, there are lots of things you can do to make the switch to dual residency more comfortable for everyone.

**Let your child have a say.** If you're establishing a new home, involve your child in the furnishing and decorating of her new bedroom, suggests Judith Ruskay Rabinor, Ph.D., author of *Befriending Your Ex After Divorce: Making Life Better for You, Your Kids and Yes, Your Ex*. For instance, your child might help pick out the paint color or some cool new sheets.

**Make the new place familiar.** Too much newness or change can be overwhelming to a child. She'll feel more comfortable in her new environment with some familiar belongings around her. If there's something special at your former home that you know she adores (like a butterfly night-light), see if you can find the same item for your new home, or make sure it's in a "go bag" that travels with her from house to house. Talk to your ex about items that you can split between households. Even ordinary items like plates and cups from a beloved princess collection can be reassuring as your child adjusts to new surroundings.

**Resist the urge to compete.** The parent who remains at the first home may find it hard to listen to her child gush about how much she loves her new room at the other parent's place. But this isn't the time to try to one-up the other parent by giving your child's old room a big makeover. "The last thing a child needs at this point is more change," Dr. Doherty says. In fact, your child likely craves the comfort and familiarity of the room she's long called her own. Try to muster some enthusiasm for your child's new

digs, though. You don't want her to feel guilty for enjoying her time there.

**Come up with a packing plan.** Constantly packing and unpacking for trips between homes can be exhausting for everyone. It also ups this risk that items will be forgotten. To alleviate this stress, both homes always should have certain items on hand, such as toiletries, pajamas, spare clothing, books, and movies. Help younger children pack their bags a day in advance. This can serve as another reminder to your child that she will be leaving for the other parent's house soon.

**Keep dual calendars.** Use visual reminders in both homes -- such as a calendar with Mom's days highlighted in one color and Dad's days marked in another -- to help your child keep track of where he will be and when. "It's a lot of work to keep things flowing smoothly while shuttling kids back and forth. A written, visible schedule benefits everyone," says Arianna Jeret, a divorce mediator and coach in Redondo Beach, California.

**Find some common ground.** When Jeret and her husband split, they came up with three rules that their two sons, ages 4 and 9, were expected to follow in both homes. They include:

- Do not ask one parent for permission to do something that the other parent has already said no to.
- Start homework within the first hour after school so that the family can enjoy the evening together.
- Otherwise, when at Dad's house, follow his rules; when at Mom's house, follow hers.

"These rules are written on whiteboards in both homes for the kids to see," Jeret says. Not only does this step ensure that your child knows what is expected of her regardless of where he is living, it also sends the message that even though Mom and Dad are no longer married, they are still committed to parenting as a team.

**Be low-key about arrivals.** Children often need time to adjust when they make the switch between houses. Come up with a routine to help smooth the transition. You can plan the same favorite meal, read a book together, or play a game.

**Determine roles on switch days.** Experts typically suggest that the parent who has been keeping the child be the one to drop her off at the other parent's home when it's time to make the transition. This ensures that you don't interrupt a special moment by showing up at the other parent's home to take the child away too early.

# Children and Divorce

## Helping Kids Cope with Separation and Divorce

For children, divorce can be an especially stressful, sad, and confusing time. At any age, kids may feel shocked, uncertain, or angry at the prospect of mom and dad splitting up. They may even feel guilty, blaming themselves for the problems at home. While it's normal for a child to grieve the breakup of the family, as a parent there's plenty you can do to make the process less painful for your kids. Divorce is never a seamless process, but these tips can help your children cope with the upheaval and come out the other side more resilient, more understanding, and even with a closer bond to both parents.

## How can I support my child through divorce?

A separation or divorce is a highly stressful and emotional experience for everyone involved, but it can often feel to your children that their whole world has been turned upside down. At any age, it can be traumatic to witness the dissolution of your parents' marriage and the breakup of the family. Inevitably, such a transitional time can't be without some measure of grief and hardship, but you can dramatically reduce your children's pain by making their well-being your top priority.

Your patience, reassurance, and listening ear can minimize tension as your children learn to cope with unfamiliar circumstances. By providing routines your kids can rely on, you remind them that they can count on you for stability, structure, and care. And by maintaining a working relationship with your ex, you can help your kids avoid the stress and anguish that comes with watching parents in conflict. With your support, your kids can not only successfully navigate this unsettling time, but even emerge from it feeling loved, confident, and strong.

## What your child wants from mom and dad during a divorce

- I need both of you to stay involved in my life. Please write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions. When you don't stay involved, I feel like I'm not important and that you don't really love me.
- Please stop fighting and work hard to get along with each other. Try to agree on matters related to me. When you fight about me, I think that I did something wrong and I feel guilty.
- I want to love you both and enjoy the time that I spend with each of you. Please support me and the time that I
- spend with each of you. If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides and love one parent more than the other.

- Please communicate directly with my other parent so that I don't have to send messages back and forth.
- When talking about my other parent, please say only nice things, or don't say anything at all. When you say mean, unkind things about my other parent, I feel like you are expecting me to take your side.
- Please remember that I want both of you to be a part of my life. I count on my mom and dad to raise me, to teach me what is important, and to help me when I have problems.

## How to tell kids about divorce

When it comes to telling your kids about your divorce, many parents freeze up. Make the conversation a little easier on both yourself and your children by preparing what you're going to say before you sit down to talk. If you can anticipate tough questions, deal with your own anxieties ahead of time, and plan carefully what you'll be telling them, you will be better equipped to help your children handle the news.

### What to say and how to say it

Difficult as it may be to do, try to strike an empathetic tone and address the most important points right up front. Give your children the benefit of an honest—but kid-friendly—explanation.

**Tell the truth.** Your kids are entitled to know why you are getting a divorce, but long-winded reasons may only confuse them. Pick something simple and honest, like "We can't get along anymore." You may need to remind your children that while sometimes parents and kids don't always get along, parents and kids don't stop loving each other or get divorced from each other.

**Say "I love you."** However simple it may sound, letting your children know that your love for them hasn't changed is a powerful message. Tell them you'll still be caring for them in every way, from fixing their breakfast to helping with homework.

**Address changes.** Preempt your kids' questions about changes in their lives by acknowledging that some things will be different now, and other things won't. Let them know that together you can deal with each detail as you go.

## Avoid blaming

It's vital to be honest with your kids, but without being critical of your spouse. This can be especially difficult when there have been hurtful events, such as infidelity, but with a little diplomacy, you can avoid playing the blame game.

**Present a united front.** As much as you can, try to agree in advance on an explanation for your separation or divorce—and stick to it.

**Plan your conversations.** Make plans to talk with your children before any changes in the living arrangements occur. And plan to talk when your spouse is present, if possible.

**Show restraint.** Be respectful of your spouse when giving the reasons for the separation.

## How much information should I give my child about the divorce?

Especially at the beginning of your separation or divorce, you'll need to pick and choose how much to tell your children. Think carefully about how certain information will affect them.

- **Be age-aware.** In general, younger children need less detail and will do better with a simple explanation, while older kids may need more information.
- **Share logistical information.** Do tell kids about changes in their living arrangements, school, or activities, but don't overwhelm them with the details.
- **Keep it real.** No matter how much or how little you decide to tell your kids, remember that the information should be truthful above all else.

## Help your child grieve the divorce

- For kids, divorce can feel like an intense loss—the loss of a parent, the loss of the family unit, or simply the loss of the life they knew. You can help your children grieve their loss and adjust to new circumstances by helping them express their emotions.
- **Listen.** Encourage your child to share their feelings and really *listen* to them. They may be feeling sadness, loss or frustration about things you may not have expected.

- **Help them find words for their feelings.** It's normal for children to have difficulty expressing their feelings. You can help them by noticing their moods and encouraging them to talk.
- **Let them be honest.** Children might be reluctant to share their true feelings for fear of hurting you. Let them know that whatever they say is okay. They may blame you for the divorce but if they aren't able to share their honest feelings, they will have a harder time working through them.
- **Make talking about the divorce an ongoing process.** As children age and mature, they often have new questions, feelings, or concerns about what happened, so you may want to go over the same ground again and again.
- **Acknowledge their feelings.** You may not be able to fix their problems or change their sadness to happiness, but it is important for you to acknowledge their feelings rather than dismissing them. You can also inspire trust by showing that you understand.

### Let kids know they're not at fault

Many kids believe that they had something to do with the divorce, recalling times they argued with their parents, received poor grades, or got in trouble. To help your kids let go of this misconception:

**Set the record straight.** Repeat why you decided to get a divorce. Sometimes hearing the real reason for your decision can help.

**Be patient.** Kids may seem to "get it" one day and be unsure the next. Treat your child's confusion or misunderstandings with patience.

**Reassure.** As often as you need to, remind your children that both parents will continue to love them and that they are not responsible for the divorce.

### Give reassurance and love

Children have a remarkable ability to heal when given the support and love they need. Your words, actions, and ability to remain consistent are all important tools to reassure your children of your unchanging love.

**Both parents will be there.** Let your kids know that even though the physical circumstances of the family unit will change, they can continue to have healthy, loving relationships with both of their parents.

**It'll be okay.** Tell kids that things won't always be easy, but that they will work out. Knowing it'll be all right can provide incentive for your kids to give a new situation a chance.

**Closeness.** Physical closeness—in the form of hugs, pats on the shoulder, or simple proximity—has a powerful way of reassuring your child of your love.

**Be honest.** When kids raise concerns or anxieties, respond truthfully. If you don't know the answer, say gently that you aren't sure right now, but you'll find out and it will be okay.

## **Provide stability and structure**

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While it's good for kids to learn to be flexible, adjusting to many new things at once can be very difficult. Help your kids adjust to change by providing as much stability and structure as possible in their daily lives.

Remember that establishing structure and continuity doesn't mean that you need rigid schedules or that mom and dad's routines need to be exactly the same. But creating some regular routines at each household and consistently communicating to your children what to expect will provide your kids with a sense of calm and stability.

### **The comfort of routines**

Kids feel safer and more secure when they know what to expect next. Knowing that, even when they switch homes, dinnertime is followed by a bath and then homework, for example, can set a child's mind at ease.

Maintaining routine also means continuing to observe rules, rewards, and discipline with your children. Resist the temptation to spoil kids during a divorce by not enforcing limits or allowing them to break rules.

## **Take care of yourself**

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The first safety instruction for an airplane emergency is to put the oxygen mask on yourself before you put it on your child. When it comes to helping your kids through your divorce, the take home message is: take care of yourself so that you can be there for your kids.

## Here's What You Need To Do For Your Teens

By KRYSTLE RUSSIN

Inspired by his own experience and the experience of his friends, Bill Sears, a 16-year old in Marietta, Ga., decided to create his own Web site to help kids deal with divorce. He created [BillsArena.com](http://BillsArena.com) in April 2006, which he touts as the "the Internet's first divorce support site for kids, by a kid."

"A lot of people are really shocked that a 16-year old kid would put up something like that," said Sears, who thinks that teens connect more with the Web site because it is written by a teen.

"I saw the problems that I went through with my parents' divorce, and it really affected me and hurt me a lot, and I really saw a lot of other kids at school who were just having a hard time," he said. "I said, 'I think I'll stick some of my advice up there and help them get through this abomination called divorce.'"

He thinks kids and parents enjoy his Web site is because it approaches divorce from a different perspective. "I take a very sarcastic approach on it, actually, and it's very in your face. I'm not going around it. I'll just say how it is, and deal with it," said Sears. "I get a lot of 'thank yous' for putting this up."

According to a brochure from the Center for Young Women's Health, divorce can cause a number of feelings for teens -- from shock, surprise, anxiety, anger, sadness, fear, guilt, relief, worry and a "feeling of loss....All of these feelings are a normal part of coping with all of the changes in your family life..."

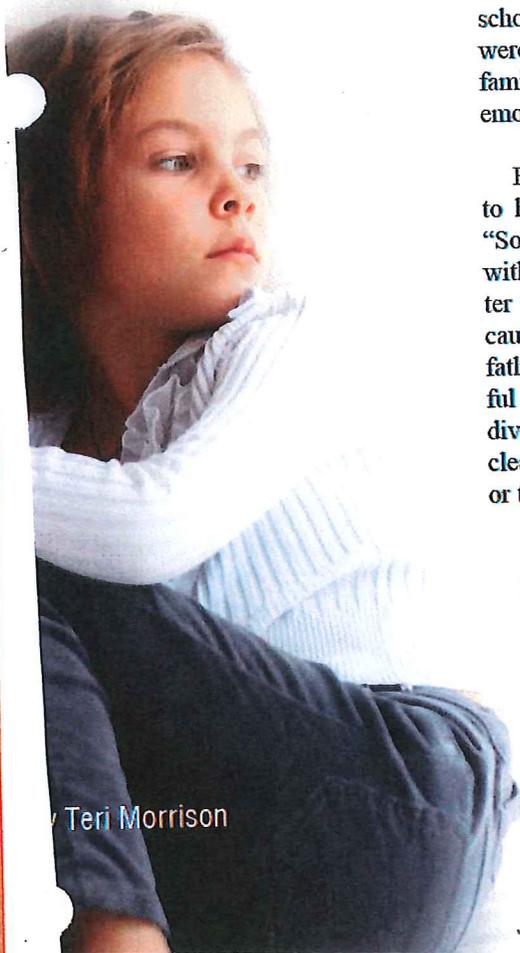
According to Sister Mary Carole Curran, a psychologist and executive director of Catholic Family Services in Sioux Falls, S.D., divorce is harder on the children than the parents. There are many questions, particularly as the former spouses move on and begin dating or remarrying. Curran said her job is to help youngsters cope with those changes.

For instance, when a parent begins dating, sometimes the new significant other tries too hard to befriend the child. Or if a parent remarries, the new spouse takes over parenting when the parent is too weak, which is a mistake. "The new spouse should know that he or she does not ever replace the children's biological parent..." Curran said.

"They [the step-parent] should stand behind the rules that the parent makes," Curran said. "The parent makes and enforces the rules, in the only case of which they're alone and, like a baby-sitter, they have authority. Too often, the step-parent steps in, and especially if the natural parent is weak in parenting, they're going to come in and fix all the mistakes the natural parent made, and that's the quickest way they're going to get rejected."

# Warning Signs

All children of divorce suffer some emotional pain as a result of their parents' split: minor for some, and all-consuming for others. Here's how to recognize the warning signs that your kids are not coping well.



Teri Morrison

When Linda and Steve decided to divorce, they worried about how their eight-year-old daughter Shannon would react to the news. They quickly and amicably finalized the divorce to avoid dragging their child through an emotional battleground. To keep her life from having too many major upheavals at one time, they decided that Shannon and Linda would remain in the family home while Steve moved to an apartment across town. Steve and Linda hoped that if her school routine and social connections weren't disrupted, the transition to a new family situation would be easier on her emotionally.

Eight months later, Shannon seems to have adjusted well to the divorce. "Sometimes, I think Shannon is coping with our new living arrangements better than I am," says Linda. "She never causes a problem for either me or her father. In fact, she seems more helpful around the house than before the divorce – I never have to remind her to clean her room anymore, for example, or that it's her turn with the dishes."

Jennifer wishes she were half as lucky with her eight-year-old son, Sammy. She and her ex-husband's divorce proceedings mirror those of Linda and Steve, yet Sammy's reaction to the divorce is almost the exact opposite of Shannon's. "I can't seem to reach Sammy," says Jennifer. "His grades are slipping in school, he lashes out at both me and his father over the smallest things, and he often refuses to do his chores. The hardest

part for me is watching my bright, happy-go-lucky son turn into a moody, angry little boy."

You'd probably agree that Sammy – and probably his parents – need some counseling to help him adjust to his parents' divorce. You'd probably also agree that Shannon is every divorcing parent's dream: a child who seems to accept her parents' divorce with little or no fuss. However, while Sammy might seem as if he's headed to detention hall for life, Shannon may be the one who's more in need of counseling.

Generally speaking, children of divorce fall into three basic categories:

1. "Angels" (who hope that their parents will get back together if they're on their best behavior)
2. "Devils" (who are acting out to draw attention to themselves and to give their parents a common cause: fixing the kid's problems)
3. "Normal Kids" (who keep their heads down, don't ask questions, don't act up during or immediately after the divorce).

Parents often overlook kids in the third category because they want to believe that their kids are fine with the divorce. However, some of these kids could be in either shock or denial: they don't know what to say, so they don't say anything. They maybe like slow-burning fuses that blow up eventually.

Of course, there are exceptions. Some kids are more resilient than others, and with love and support from and frequent access to both parents (who have

established a cooperative, respectful co-parenting relationship), they cope with divorce really well.

## “Normal” Adjustment

Experts say that it should take about a year for children to come to terms with their parents’ divorce; they may still have feelings of sadness or anger, but they should be coping well with those feelings. Although the progression will vary depending on their ages, by the end of the first year after the divorce, your children should have:

- dealt with their feelings of loss due to the divorce
- dealt with any feelings that they were rejected or deserted by one of their parents
- accepted that the family will no longer be living together
- accepted that you won’t be reuniting with their other parent
- removed themselves from adult conflicts
- returned to a normal interest in themselves and their activities
- stopped blaming themselves for the divorce.

If you moved as a result of the divorce, they should have:

- adjusted to your new home and their new school, and have made some new friends.

## When to Get Help

One bad grade on a school test doesn’t mean you need to make an appointment with a family counselor. Not all of your kid’s problems are going to be a result of your divorce: one temper tantrum, one fight at school, or one incident of bed-wetting isn’t necessarily linked directly to the divorce. These kinds of things can happen to any child in any family situation. So before you start panicking that your child has become psychologically damaged for life, Google “normal child psychological development” and read some relevant articles. Then go to [www.DivorceMagazine.com](http://www.DivorceMagazine.com) and check the “Divorce and Children” category; these resources will help you

understand the difference between normal and problematic behaviors.

Discipline problems are usually what spur parents to seek professional help for their kids. These problems can stem from your child’s inability to sort out his/her feelings or to adjust to the divorce – or it might just mean that your child lacks good coping skills. A child’s bad behavior can result from fear, hostility, or insecurity, and it’s a sign that your child needs more positive attention. Children who don’t receive positive parental attention try for *any* kind of attention, even if it’s negative: they would rather misbehave and get yelled at than not get any attention at all.

Any extreme deviation from a child’s normal behavior may be a sign that he or she has been affected by the divorce: wild behavior in a previously quiet child, or a once-sociable child who now refuses to come out of his or her room, for example.

Although you shouldn’t wait forever to seek professional help, if their adjustment problems aren’t severe, you should give your kids six months to a year to get over the divorce.

Consider seeking professional help if your child is:

- doing uncharacteristically badly in school for three or four months, even after you’ve consulted his or her teachers and/or school counselors
- losing friends because he or she is acting in an unusually aggressive manner
- showing uncharacteristic, intense anger towards others; this could be anything from temper tantrums to overreacting in minor situations
- developing prolonged mood swings that range from extreme hostility to extreme affection
- showing unrestrained grieving for an absent parent or for “the way things used to be”
- showing other radical changes in behavior, such as truancy or fighting at school, cheating, lying, or stealing
- developing physical ailments, such

as stomach or headaches, sleep problems, eating disorders, or alcohol or drug abuse.

If a child internalizes his or her feelings about the divorce, then it’s much more difficult to know if he or she is having problems coping. In fact, a child in this situation may not show any outward signs of trouble until years later. In cases like this, a school teacher, guidance counselor, family doctor – someone your child likes and trusts – may have more luck than you in trying to discern what’s really going on with your child.

## Helping Children Cope

While some children make it through their parents’ divorce relatively easily, others can feel the after-effects of a divorce for months and even years later, suffering socially, emotionally, and academically. The reasons some children cope better than others are as varied as the children themselves. However, research indicates that the lasting effects of divorce on children usually occur when a divorce is particularly difficult. If parents are fighting and are filled with anger and hurt, they generally don’t supply their kids with the kind of consistent care they need – especially at emotionally trying times.

The best way to help your children cope is to agree to keep the hostility and bitterness to a minimum before, during, and after the actual divorce proceedings. Reassure them that although there are going to be changes in their lives, the changes won’t all be bad.

You can’t force your kids to feel happy, and you shouldn’t try to short-circuit their grieving process. Provided with support, love, and consistent care, most children eventually adjust to divorce by themselves. ■

### Related Article

**How Counselling Helps Kids**  
Strategies for alleviating a child’s feelings of fear and insecurity.  
[www.divorcemag.com/articles/how-counselling-helps-kids](http://www.divorcemag.com/articles/how-counselling-helps-kids)

# Age-by-Age Guide to What Children Understand About Divorce

## Birth to 18 Months

**Divorce** represents a pivotal and often traumatic shift in a child's world -- and from his perspective, a loss of family. When told of the news, many children feel sad, angry, and anxious, and have a hard time grasping how their lives will change. The age at which a child's parents divorce also has an impact on how he responds and what he understands about the new family structure. Here is a brief summary of what children comprehend at different ages and how you can help ease their transition.

During infancy, babies are able to feel tension in the home (and between their parents) but can't understand the reasoning behind the conflict. If the tension continues, babies may become irritable and clingy, especially around new people, and have frequent emotional outbursts. They may also tend to regress or show signs of developmental delay:

*How to ease the transition:* Children this age require consistency and routine and are comforted by familiarity. Therefore, it's helpful to maintain normal daily routines, particularly regarding sleep and meals, during and after the divorce. Provide your child with his favorite toys or security items, and spend extra time holding him and offering physical comfort. Rely on the help of friends and family, and be sure to get plenty of rest so you'll be alert when your baby is awake.

## 18 Months to 3 Years

During the toddler years, a child's main bond is with her parents, so any major disruption in her home life can be difficult for her to accept and comprehend. What's more, kids this age are self-centered and may think they've caused their parents' breakup. They may cry and want more attention than usual, regress and return to thumb sucking, resist toilet training, have a fear of being abandoned, or have trouble going to sleep or sleeping alone at night.

*How to ease the transition:* If possible, parents should work together to develop normal, predictable routines that their child can easily follow. It's also important to spend quality time with your child and offer extra attention, and ask trusted friends and relatives to do the same. Discuss your child's feelings (if she's old enough to talk), read books together, and assure her that she's not responsible for the breakup.

## 3 to 6 Years

Preschoolers don't understand the whole notion of **divorce** and don't want their parents to separate -- no matter how tense the home environment. In fact, divorce is a particularly hard concept for these little

"control freaks" to comprehend, because they feel as if they have no power to control the outcome.

Like toddlers, preschoolers believe they are ultimately responsible for their parents' separation. They may experience uncertain feelings about the future, keep their anger trapped inside, have unpleasant thoughts or ideas, or be plagued by nightmares.

*How to ease the transition:* Parents should try to handle the divorce in an open, positive manner if possible, as a child this age will reflect his parents' moods and attitudes. Preschoolers will need someone to talk to and a way to express their feelings. They may respond well to age-appropriate books about the topic. Kids this age also need to feel safe and secure and to know they will continue seeing their noncustodial parent (the one with whom they don't live on a regular basis). Set up a regular visitation schedule, and make sure it's adhered to consistently.

## **6 to 11 Years**

If school-age kids have grown up in a nurturing environment, it will be only natural for them to have a fear of being abandoned during a [divorce](#). Younger children -- 5- to 8-year-olds, for instance -- will not understand the concept of divorce and may feel as if their parents are divorcing *them*. They may worry about losing their father (if they're living with their mom) and fantasize that their parents will get back together. In fact, they often believe they can "rescue" their parents' marriage.

Kids from 8 to 11 may blame one parent for the separation and align themselves with the "good" parent against the "bad." They may accuse their parents of being mean or selfish and express their anger in various ways: Boys may fight with classmates or lash out against the world, while girls may become anxious, withdrawn, or depressed. Children of either gender may experience upset stomachs or headaches due to stress, or may make up symptoms in order to stay home from school.

*How to ease the transition:* Elementary-school children can feel extreme loss and rejection during a divorce, but parents can rebuild their child's sense of security and self-esteem. Start by having each parent spend quality time with the child, urging her to open up about her feelings. Reassure her that neither parent will abandon her, and reiterate that the divorce is not her fault. (Likewise, parents should not blame one another for the split, but explain that it was a mutual decision.) It's also important to maintain a regular visitation schedule as kids thrive on predictability -- particularly during times of turmoil.

Finally, since school, friendships, and extracurricular activities are of increasing importance to kids this age, encourage your child to get involved in events and pastimes she thoroughly enjoys. Help her rekindle her self-esteem, and encourage her to reach out to others and not withdraw from the world.