

## When a Family Breaks Up: Divorce and Separation

### Deciding to divorce or separate is a difficult decision for parents.

Although you may hear that people divorce too easily, most parents do not come to the decision to separate or divorce easily. When people choose to marry they are committing to a life together and most never think they will separate or divorce.

The decision to separate or divorce is usually reached after years of pain and struggle to try to make a marriage work. Although parents may have to accept that they have failed in some way to make their marriage work, this does not mean they are failures as parents. **The parent-child relationship continues after a separation or divorce and is a key relationship for the well-being and mental health of a child.**

### Children develop best when surrounded by people who love them.

- Although divorce and separation are stressful for children, they can cope with it and move on to lead healthy and productive lives when they are surrounded by people who love them.
- Children need strong relationships to cope with a family change as large as a separation or divorce. **This means that children need to maintain relationships with both their parents and extended families.** The only time it may be better to sever a relationship is when there is ongoing abuse between the child and adult. This decision, however, should be made with help from a trained professional—such as a counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist, and/or a state family service worker.

### Children of divorce have to redefine their family.

- Children living in a family where the parents have divorced or separated need to know that they still have a family. It may mean that their family lives in two homes, that new people are added—such as stepparents— or that they will now live with their grandparents.
- These children need to know that families are not defined by their living together — but rather by the relationships that they have with one another. Yes, their family is changing, but it is not dying.



## **Holidays and special events can be a challenge.**

- One of the most difficult times for children of divorced/separated families is special days or events. Children often feel torn about whom to spend the time with. They may think they must choose between parents. Holidays may be dreaded because the child knows he will only be able to be with one parent at a time.



## **It is up to parents to make these times less stressful for children.**

Talk with your child about what she would like to have happen that day.

- Do not make your child feel guilty for wanting to spend time with her other parent.
- If possible, try to celebrate some occasions together with the other parent.
- Consider allowing your child to spend a whole holiday with one parent.
- Develop new ways to celebrate. Perhaps you and your child can celebrate birthdays a week after the actual date—allowing her to be with her other parent on the actual date. Include your child in planning the celebration.
- Find good ways to spend your time when your child is away from you. Let your child know what you are doing and that you will be OK.

## **Help children cope with the changes.**

Tell your child daily something positive to help her cope with the family change.

For example:

- You are not responsible in any way for the divorce.
- You will always be loved and protected.
- Even good parents get divorced. We can both still be good parents to you.
- The love I have for you is different than the love I have for a partner. Partners may change, but parents are forever. We will never stop loving you.
- Things will get better, even though it seems hopeless now.
- The love we have for each other is much more important than where the people in your family live.

## **Acknowledge your child's feelings.**

Children often have very mixed feelings after a family change, such as a separation or divorce. They need to know that this is normal.

You can both love and be angry with someone at the same time. Children need to know that all their feelings are OK. It is only by voicing our feelings that we can deal with them.

- Listen for the content and the feelings behind your child's words. Is he expressing joy, sadness, excitement, or anger—either through his words or body language?
- Give words to your child's feelings. "You look really sad to me." "It sounds as if you are both happy and sad about going with your dad to his friend's house."

## **Let your child know you can handle her difficult emotions, such as when she is angry.**

Children sometimes try to protect their parents from their feelings—especially when they know a parent is going through a rough time.

- Let your child know he can share all his feelings with you and that feelings are good because they help us know when we have problems (otherwise known as “opportunities to grow”).
- If your child does not tell you how he is feeling, try describing how you think your child is feeling—“It really made you angry that your dad and I split up.” You may not be able to protect your child from sad and angry feelings, but you can help him learn to deal with them.
- It is OK to let your child know what you are feeling, as long as you do not depend on him for your emotional support. “I am really sad that your dad and I are getting a divorce. But it is not your job to make me feel better.”

### **Maintain routines.**

- Routines help children feel safe and secure because they know what to expect. After a family change — like a divorce or separation — routines become even more important. As much as possible, keep bedtime, mealtimes, and school routines regular.
- Of course there will always be changes. You can help your child prepare for these by telling him ahead of time, answering his questions, and allowing him to make some small decisions related to the change. For example, if you are moving, let your child know what is going to happen, listen to his reactions and questions, let him know what decisions he can be involved in, and finally, reassure him that there will be a routine again soon.



### **Be aware that boys and girls may react differently.**

- Boys often act-up or develop behavior problems in reaction to the family change. A boy who is acting up is often easier to spot as having a problem because his behavior is disruptive.
- Girls tend to turn inward and are more prone to depression. Girls may become withdrawn and quiet or try to be the “perfect” child.
- Both reactions are signs that your child is feeling stressed and needs help to cope with the family change.

### **A parent can help children by:**

- allowing them to voice their feelings about the separation or divorce
- establishing and enforcing clear rules and limits about behavior
- reassuring the child that he is still loved and cared for
- seeking professional help if the child’s behaviors do not return to normal within 6-8 weeks

### **Most children feel the break-up is their fault.**

Many children—especially preschool and young school -age children—believe that they caused the family break-up.

- They believe that if they had been better, then their parents would still be together.



- Parents need to be clear with children about why they are separating or divorcing. “Your mom and I have tried to get along, but we just don’t seem to be able to.” Or “I can no longer live with your father’s drinking. He is unable to stop right now, so we are going to live apart.”
- Children need to be constantly reminded that they are not responsible for the break-up—and even then it may take a long time for them to believe it.

### **Take care of yourself.**

How you handle the separation or divorce will greatly influence how your child reacts. Make sure to take care of yourself.

### **Deal with your feelings and emotions.**

Make sure to have friends, family, or perhaps a counselor with whom you can share and work through your feelings.

### **Take care of your body.**

Be sure to eat regularly and to exercise. The healthier you are, the better you can handle stress.

### **Take some time for yourself.**

Be sure to have some alone time to relax and focus on you—even if it’s just for half an hour after the kids go to bed.



### **Do not expect too much from yourself.**

Allow yourself to make mistakes and know that you can learn from them.

### **Children need firm, loving limits during and after divorce or separation.**

- Children need to know that their lives are not out-of-control and that you will not let them get out-of-control.
- It may seem hard to enforce rules when you are feeling guilty for having disrupted your child’s life—but firm, loving limits are needed now more than ever.
  - 1. Decide what the important rules are for your family and clearly explain them to your child.
  - 2. Be clear what behaviors go with each rule. For the rule “we treat each other with respect,” you may expect that people listen to each other, that no one hits anyone else, that people share with one another, etc.
  - 3. Catch your child being good. One of the best ways to teach good behavior is to praise it when it happens.

### **Resources For Kids:**

Dinosaurs Divorce by Laurene and Marc Brown

Mom’s House, Dad’s House for Kids: Feeling at Home in One Home or Two by Isolina Ricci

Why are We Getting a Divorce? by Peter Mayle

The Divorce Workbook: A Guide for Kids and Families by Sally Ives

### **For Parents:**

Divorce Book for Parents by Vicki Lansky

Have a good month!

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