Parenting After Divorce

S. Doehser, J. Hare, and A.M. Morrow

Divorce is a long process of reorganizing family life. When a divorcing couple has children, the parents continue to have a relationship—not as husband and wife but as co-parents.

Children’s lives are changed when parents divorce. Often children experience confusion, sadness, and anger. There is a great deal of variation in children’s responses—even children in the same family.

Three key factors are essential to children’s positive adjustment following divorce.

1. The parents function effectively. Parents who cope with the disruption of divorce are effective parents. They keep their day-to-day work and home lives going. They provide love, nurturance, consistent discipline, and predictable routines.

2. The parents do not engage in excessive conflict. When parents are cooperating in childrearing after divorce, children do better. Following divorce, what may seem like a simple disagreement between parents can be confusing to children.

3. The parents maintain a relationship with both mother and father. Children often want to have two involved parents. There can be added stress for children that come from the children’s separation of parents.

OSU Extension publications

Shared Custody: Increasing Benefits and Reducing Strains, EC 1443, by Sue Doehser and Jan Hare (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1994). 75¢

Shared Custody: Financial Considerations, FS 324, by Alice Mills Morrow (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1995). $1.50


How to Live with a Single Parent, (Preschool and older) by A.M. Martin (Scholastic, New York, 1994).

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For further reading


Non-Traditional Families, EC 1412, by Jan Hare and Lizbeth A. Gray (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1992). 75¢

Communication Through Family Meetings, EC 1436, by Leslie D. Hall and Joe Angelelli (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1994). 50¢

Communication Strategies for Adult Couples, FS 322, by Leslie D. Hall (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1994). No charge.

Helping your children adjust to divorce

Several factors influence how a child adjusts to divorce. These include the stage of divorce, the child’s stage of development, and whether the child is a girl or a boy.

Stage of divorce

1. Immediate. Usually the parents bring about the divorce. They may be angry, and conflict is common. The needs of children are apt to be an emotional and behavioral focus. Children’s needs are apt to be met since it’s very difficult for parents to focus on others. Children may experience confusion, sadness, and anger. There is a great deal of variation in children’s responses—even children in the same family.

2. Short-term. Parents begin dealing with the realities of divorce, such as economic support and parenting plans. Families often move so often that young children may experience changes in neighborhoods, schools, and friends. Parents may be hurt and angry, and conflict is common. Parents struggle to balance work, personal lives, and time with children.

3. Long-range. This typically begins 2 to 3 years after the initial separation. The practical issues generally have been worked out, and parents are rebuilding their lives. Often there is a new partner or spouse to whom children must adjust.

Age of the child

A child’s age and stage of development affect the way he or she responds to divorce.

Infants and toddlers (ages birth—2)

Very young children may develop powerful worries over being separated from a parent, especially when hungry, tired, or frustrated. Children are remarkably vulnerable to seeing their parents upset. Infants and toddlers can feel overwhelmed and frightened if parents’ feelings threaten their own sense of security and safety.

Children are still quite limited in how much they can understand about their world. They may show signs of distress such as regression to earlier stages,
frequent nighttime waking, refusing foods, or crying and clinging to parents.

Helping infants and toddlers cope
1. Shared physical custody is not recommended. Children of this age have a difficult time dealing with inconsistency and unpredictability in caregiving. It’s important that the parent with whom the child is not living has as much contact with the child as possible. Set up a regular schedule for spending time with the child either at the other parent’s home or outside the home—perhaps at a park or the home of a relative or friend.
2. Maintain a consistent child care schedule. Activities and child care providers should be predictable. Encourage attachments to familiar objects—such as a stuffed animal or a blanket—for times when the child is separated from parents.
3. Infants and toddlers need to spend as much time as possible with at least one parent. If you are working, this may mean cutting back on your social life temporarily, including your child in your activities.
4. If you’re worried about your child’s distress, consult a parent educator, child counselor, or pediatrician.

Preschool children (ages 3–5)
Although preschoolers are more advanced than infants and toddlers, they have a limited understanding of the divorce process. Children’s thinking centers around themselves. That is, they look at divorce from their own viewpoint rather than from the parents’ perspective. These thought processes can result in children blaming themselves for the divorce. Children may hold fantasies of being abandoned. At this stage, children are easily embarrassed by the thought of being abandoned. It’s not unusual for a young child to feel responsible for the divorce. Children also tend to see things in black and white, so they may blame one parent for the divorce.

Very often the child years for the parents to get back together. He or she may experience frightening fantasies of being abandoned. At this stage, children have difficulty sustaining an emotional bond with an absent parent. Therefore, the parent with whom the child is living is encouraged to be involved.

Helping preschool children cope
1. Tell children about the divorce. Briefly explain in simple, non-blaming terms why it occurred. Talk about what the divorce will mean to them.
2. Develop a consistent daily routine and regular caregiving setting, and provide explanations of changes in schedules to help children adjust to the divorce.
3. It’s often difficult for young children to be away from parents for a week or longer. Shorter periods of separation from the parent with physical custody are advised. An appropriate living arrangement in a shared custody situation is 3 days with one parent and 4 days with the other parent.

Elementary school children (ages 6–8)
Children make great leaps in their cognitive, emotional, and social development at this time. They can comprehend more than just their concrete experience; for example, they can anticipate the future.

Young children depend on their parents for safety, security, and a positive self-esteem. They have a strong sense of family. Therefore, they may be overwhelmed with sadness at losing their family as it once existed. It’s not unusual for a young child to feel responsible for the divorce. Children also tend to see things in black and white, so they may blame one parent for the divorce.

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Helping young children cope
1. Tell children that the divorce will happen, and explain what it will mean for him or her. During that talk, briefly explain why the divorce is occurring, without imparting blame to either parent. Reassure the child that he/she is loved and is not responsible for the divorce. It’s especially helpful to have both parents talk to the child and provide a consistent explanation about the divorce.
2. Repeat the first talk 2 days later. Empathize with the child’s sadness and feelings of loss. Share why you and your partner feel this way and what can be done about it. Children should maintain as much contact as possible with both parents. Shared custody may be positive for children at this stage of development.

Late elementary school children (ages 9–12)
During this time, children can achieve a realistic understanding of the divorce. They can comprehend reasons for the divorce, rather than just react to it. At this stage, children are very concerned with peer relationships. Even in the best of times, they are easily embarrassed by their parents. Therefore, they may not want to share with others what is happening at home. They may not outwardly display how the divorce affects them. However, they still may have internal conflicts that need to be addressed.

Children at this stage may feel the pull of one parent against the other. Parents may disagree as to who is to blame or has the child either at the other parent’s home or the other parent’s home. This way, both parents are involved in the child’s accomplishments and can talk with the child about school.

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Adolescents (ages 13–17)
Adolescents undergo profound physical changes. They become more emotionally mature and may have intense relationships. Peers are very important and striving for independence is a significant task of adolescence. Children at this age need support, love, and firm guidance.

Adolescents are more capable of understanding relationships and can cope with sharing custody more effectively than younger children. However, it’s still important to avoid assigning blame to either parent. Refrain from imposing adult responsibilities on the teen.

3. Keeping parental conflict to an absolute minimum may help reduce the adolescent’s anger.
4. Adolescents have a greater ability to provide input on their living arrangements. Some teens do well moving between each parent’s house every week or two, while others prefer to live most of the time in one house and spend periods of time with the other parent. Allow your adolescent to have some control over their situation.

5. Adolescents who are very distressed about the divorce may express resistance to family rules, and may act out their feelings in harmful ways. For example, they may use drugs and alcohol, engage in sexual activities, and run away from home.

Family or individual counseling is recommended in these situations. Many schools offer peer support groups to help children work through their feelings about divorce.

1. Provide your child with a safe routine and a close relationship with you. Children don’t want to feel that they are visitors in two households and don’t really belong in either. The child needs someone —a personal space— that he or she’s not living. This way, both parents are involved in the child’s accomplishments and can talk with the child about school.

6. Allow your child to express feelings. Moving from one house to the other is not always easy for children. Children may have intense feelings which they don’t know how to manage. For example, your child may refuse to get ready to leave for the other parent’s house. There could be many underlying feelings about this behavior. Perhaps the child is angry, tired, or resentful about the disruption. Help your child briefly acknowledge his or her feelings and then get on with the task.

2. Adhere to a schedule of living arrangements as much as possible. Children need continuity so they don’t doubt your trust and love. Consult with children when developing the schedule. Evaluate the schedule periodically and adapt to change.

3. Avoid “weekend parenting.” If possible, both parents should participate in the daily lives of the children. In shared custody situations, schedule living arrangements for weeks at a time or from time to time. If possible, both parents should participate primarily with one parent, try to have an extended time for the child to live with the other parent, such as during a break from school or in the summer. The parent with whom the child is not living should have as much contact as possible.

4. Help children stay connected to both parents despite their living arrangements. Letters, postcards, phone calls, and videos—even time spent together—will help them maintain contact with both parents. Children can send school papers and artwork to the parent with whom they’re not living. This way, both parents are included in the child’s accomplishments and can talk with the child about school.

5. Give the address of both parents to the child’s school so newsletters and other school information are sent to both parents. Children can send school papers and artwork to the parent with whom they’re not living. This way, both parents are included in the child’s accomplishments and can talk with the child about school.

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2. The parents do not engage in excessive conflict. When parents cooperate in childrearing after divorce, children do better. Following divorce, what may seem like a simple disagreement between parents can be upsetting to children.

3. The child maintains a positive relationship with both mother and father. Children do best when they have two involved parents. This is an ideal worth pursuing unless one parent has problems that endanger the child’s well-being.

Helping your children adjust to divorce

Several factors influence how a child adjusts to divorce. These include the stage of development, and whether the child is a girl or boy.

Stages of divorce

1. Immediate: Usually one parent moves from the family home, and the end to the marriage becomes public. Children may or may not have been given an explanation of the separation. Both parents and children experience varying degrees of turmoil, shock, and conflict.

2. Short-term: Parents begin dealing with the realities of divorce, such as economic support and parenting plans. Parents often move so children may experience changes in neighborhoods, schools, and friends. Parents may be hurt and angry, and conflict is common. Parents struggle to balance work, personal lives, and time with children.

3. Long-range: This typically begins 2 to 3 years after the initial separation. The practical issues generally have been worked out, and parents are rebuilding their lives. Often there is a new partner or spouse to whom children must adjust.

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