

Parenting After Divorce

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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 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.

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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 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. Parents are apt to be on an emotional roller coaster and have feelings of irritability and depression. Children's needs may not be met since it's very difficult for parents to focus on others while they are in crisis.

2. *Short-term.* Parents begin dealing with the realities of divorce, such as economic support and parenting plans. Families 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.

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 joy 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 or 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, unloved, or punished by their parents, and this may frighten them or make them sad. They often require help in distinguishing between imaginary and real thoughts. Throughout the stages of divorce, preschoolers often need reassurance that parents love them.

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.

Early 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 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.

Very often the child yearns 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 not living is encouraged to be involved.

Helping young children cope

1. Tell the child that the divorce will happen, and explain what it will mean for her or him. During that talk, briefly explain why the divorce is occurring, without imparting blame to either parent. Reassure the child that she/he 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.

3. The child 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 respond 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 competing loyalties between parents; they may side with one parent against the other. They may express anger because of their feelings of helplessness and sadness over the divorce. Sometimes anger toward parents is delayed until adolescence.

Helping children cope

1. Tell children about the divorce when plans are being made to separate. This helps them understand what is happening to their family and how it will affect their lives. It's ideal if parents can do this together. If this is not possible, each parent should talk with the child.

2. When new adult relationships develop, discuss them with your children. Continue to spend time alone with your children, participating in activities you enjoy doing together. Allow your children to have their own private time as needed.

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.

Some teens respond with surprise when first learning of the divorce. Soon after, they may express anger, dismay, sadness, and disappointment. They know how they feel, but they rarely understand why they feel that way. They may be highly critical of their parents for awhile.

Other adolescents feel worried about their parents. They can be very perceptive and understanding of what parents are experiencing.

Helping adolescents cope

1. Discuss the divorce directly with the adolescent. Adolescents are more capable of understanding relationship difficulties than younger children. However, it's still important to avoid blame or criticism.

2. 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 these decisions.

5. Teens 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/or run away from home.

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

Boys and girls

Boys and girls may have different ways of responding to stress. Psychologists discuss two general types of problem behaviors. One is *externalizing*. That means problem behaviors are directed outwardly, such as aggression, disobedience, or lying. The other is *internalizing*. Problem behaviors are directed inward, such as depression, anxiety, or withdrawal.

Boys are likely to externalize their distress. They often respond to high family conflict with aggression and anti-social behavior. Generally, girls appear better behaved than boys during the immediate adjustment to divorce.

However, this does not mean girls are less affected by divorce. It appears that girls tend to internalize their distress, and many years later may suffer depression and lowered self-esteem. Even if a child is not showing outward signs of distress, she or he is likely to have some distress.

Suggestions for divorced parents

Not all these ideas may be feasible for every parent. Try them to the extent that you think they might work for you.

1. *Provide your child with a safe routine and a close relationship with you.* Children don't want to feel they are visitors in two households and don't really belong in either. The child needs basic possessions—personal space, a bed, clothes, toys, and family photos in each home.

2. *Adhere to a schedule of living arrangements as much as possible.* Children need consistency 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 Thursday to Sunday. If the child lives 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.

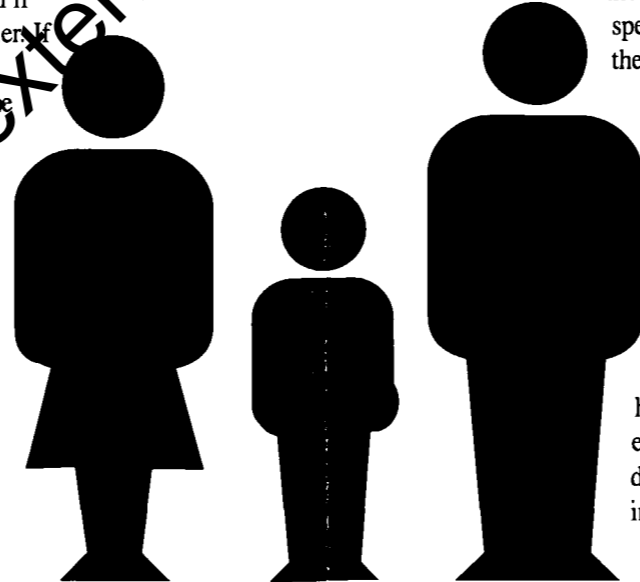
4. *Help children stay connected to both parents despite their living arrangements.* Letters, postcards, phone calls, and video- or audio-taped messages are ways to maintain contact. Long-distance shared projects, such as a baseball card collection, are a way to maintain the relationship during a long period of separation.

5. *Give the addresses 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 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 feelings underlying 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.

There may be some small ways you can help your child cope. For example, use the packing time as a time for talking together, or stop for a treat on the way to the other home. To mature emotionally, children must learn to accept reality and manage their feelings.

7. *Create rituals to help ease your child's transitions between homes.* Think of a simple activity that could become a routine for you and your child before changing houses. A trip to the park? An ice cream cone on the way to the other house? A board game while waiting for



the other parent to pick up? Try to keep this time as calm and unstressful as possible. Giving your child your undivided attention during this time also will be helpful.

8. *Provide adequate financial support.* An important concern for all parents is the financial support of the children. Financial support is a part of well-being. It influences where the child lives, the school the child attends, the likelihood the child completes high school, and the opportunity for education beyond high school.

All families with children face difficulties with finances. Divorced parents experience additional financial pressures due to the increased cost of supporting two post-divorce households. Just as parents need to work at developing systems and procedures for parenting, they need to make the effort to develop systems and procedures for sharing financial decision-making related to the children.

For further reading

Acock, A. and Demo, D. (1994).

Family Diversity and Well-Being, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Furstenberg, F. and Cherlin, A.

(1991). *Divided Families: What happens to children when parents part*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Kalter, N. (1990). *Growing Up With Divorce: Helping your child avoid immediate and later emotional problems*. Fawcett Columbine, New York.

Ricci, I. (1980). *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making shared custody work*. Macmillan Publishing, New York.

Recommended reading for children of divorce

Dinosaur's Divorce, by M. Brown (Little, Brown, New York, 1986). (Preschool and older)

How to Live with a Single Parent, by S. Gilbert (Lothrop, Lee & Shepherd, New York, 1982). (Young adults and parents)

Babysitter's Little Sister: Karen's Stepmother by A.M. Martin (Scholastic, New York, 1994). (Elementary school age)

OSU Extension publications

Shared Custody: Increasing Benefits and Reducing Strains, EC 1445, by Sue Doecher and Jan Hare (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1994). 75¢

Shared Custody: Financial Considerations, ES 324, by Alice Mills Morrow (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1995). No charge.

An Oregon Guide Part 1: Property Division and Spousal Support When Divorce Occurs, EC 1378, by Alice Mills Morrow (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1995). \$1.50

An Oregon Guide Part 2: Child Support Decisions When Divorce Occurs, EC 1379, by Alice Mills Morrow (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1995). \$1.50

Modification of Child Support in Oregon, FS 326, by Alice Mills Morrow (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1995). No charge.

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.

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