

# Helping Children Cope with Divorce



Divorce is not easy for parents or children. It takes about a year, sometimes two years, for parents and children to re-establish family life after divorce. It also takes hard work. Parents may have to work harder at parenting, at a job, or getting along with each other. The work can pay off, and while divorce may remain a painful memory, it will not prevent a family getting on with their life.

## Explaining Divorce To A Child

The meaning of divorce is different for children of different ages, and explanations need to be tailored accordingly.

Infants and toddlers don't understand what divorce means, but they do understand if their daily routine changes. Security and consistency are most important to them.

Preschoolers and young school-age children may understand the word divorce, but they are more interested in practical things.

They may ask questions such as:

- Where will I stay?
- Am I going to be left alone?
- Where will my stuff be?
- When will I see Mom/Dad?
- Do you still love me?

School-aged children want to know more about the reasons for divorce, and as time passes, may ask tricky questions that need to be answered honestly. Children in this age group also need answers to practical questions about their daily routines. They can also use a parent's help with what to tell their friends.

Teenagers want the most information, and they should get an honest but limited explanation. It is appropriate for teenagers to want to know why their parents split up, but not appropriate for them to know all the details of their parents' marriage.

- Reassure children that you love them
- Offer age-appropriate answers to children's questions about the divorce but keep details to a minimum
- Offer support and let children know their feelings are valid
- Establish and stick with routines
- Keep children out of your conflicts
- When possible, work together to raise your children
- Get help for children who have difficulty adjusting
- Get help for yourself in the form of therapy, or support groups

The following tips may help ensure that the explanations meet the needs of children, not parents:

- Reassure children that they are loved
- Put yourself in your child's shoes: what would you want to know, and how would you want to be told?
- Think about the conversation in advance – practice with a friend
- Try to be neutral (or positive, if possible) about your child's relationship with the other parent



Wheeler

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## Family Relationships

Divorced families can maximize contact between children and both parents by keeping a stable routine during the school week, but then coming up with creative options for using weekends, school vacations, and summer holidays.

Consistency in schedules and rules makes life less stressful for everyone.

Once parents agree on a plan for spending time with their children, they should stick to it. Children want to know where they are going to be at what times.

While a change or delay may seem small to a parent, it can be a big deal to a child.

Everyone needs some flexibility, but it works best after a consistent routine has been established for some time.

A few rules on parenting alone can be useful to keep in mind. Children need love, but they also need discipline. Each household needs a few clear and reasonable rules about bedtimes, responsibilities, and appropriate behavior. Parents should expect these rules to be followed. A positive focus is the best way to discipline. Praising children for doing things right works better than criticizing children for doing things wrong. Get children involved in taking responsibility for their actions and duties. Call a family meeting, explain the problem, and ask children what they (realistically) think is a good solution.

## Conflict With A Former Spouse

Generally, more contact with both parents is better for children. But if fighting is out of control, it may be better for children to see one parent less, to minimize exposure to conflict. Research shows that children experience more psychological problems when they witness or overhear fighting among parents, or when they are put in the middle of a conflict. Children benefit if their parents cooperate. While former spouses do not need to be friends, they can still work together to raise their children. Parents should never put children in the middle of their disputes.

## Identifying Problems

Most children are upset and may have trouble adjusting when their parents first separate. Some children develop psychological problems. Signs of a potential problem may include: crying, worrying, aggression, disturbed sleep, spending more time alone, or getting lower grades in school. Helpful feedback from childcare providers or teachers can give parents an idea of how children are really coping.

Often, a problem in family relationships is the cause. The parents may be fighting, or one parent may be inconsistent in spending time with the children, or the schedule may be too complicated. Other causes may include ineffective discipline, not providing children with enough affection, or placing too many emotional or practical burdens on the children.

Parents should work on coping better with the divorce, maintaining a positive relationship with their children, and finding a way to stop fighting with each other

## Getting Help

Friends and family do not always know how to react to a divorce. Some people may choose sides, and some others may distance themselves from the divorced family. Parents and children often must ask for help in coping with the divorce. In addition to family and friends, parents may find self-help books to be useful. Lawyers can give advice and negotiate agreements for parents, or parents may wish to seek out a divorce mediator. Divorce mediators specialize in helping divorcing or divorced parents negotiate their own legal agreements in a more cooperative manner. Therapists who are familiar with divorce and comfortable in offering direction can also provide objective opinions, support and advice to individuals, parents and children, or to former spouses. Support or self-help groups for parents or children may be beneficial as well. These are available in many communities, and more schools are offering groups for children of divorce.

## Connecticut Resources

State Of Connecticut  
Judicial Branch

<https://jud.ct.gov/divorce.htm>

Mobile Crisis  
Intervention Services

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