

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE

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Adapted from "Divorce Book For Parents", by Vicki Lansky
"Does Wednesday Mean Mom's House or Dad's", by Marc J. Ackerman, Ph.D

Divorce can be a highly emotional and devastating event for all those involved, especially the children. Reactions can vary from mild to severe depending on the child's age, gender, ongoing marital conflicts and whether the family has access to outside support systems. Overall family dynamics also plays a large role in how a divorce will be affect the child such as a family illness, affairs, and drug and/or alcohol use.

How do you explain to your child that mom and dad are getting divorced? When should you tell your child? Should both parents be involved in the discussion? What if the child wants to know about specific details? How can you best prepare your child for changes which will take place based on their age and developmental level? How should you deal with the variety of reactions that the child will exhibit? These and many other questions are asked by parents in the efforts to help their children cope with divorce. The following is some basic information on how children respond to divorce and some beneficial ways to help your child decrease feelings of helplessness, confusion and uncertainty while providing them with a sense of support, reassurance and hope for the future.

All children, particularly under the age of 13, possess the universal belief that the divorce is/was their fault. Thoughts and question begin to preoccupy the child such as "if only I did better in school", "if only I didn't argue so much with my parents", "if only I'd been nicer to my brother/sister", maybe my parents would still be together. Children not only believe these as well as other thoughts, but "need" to view themselves as "the problem." Parents need to be seen as in control, reliable and strong authority figures who have all the right answers to the child's endless questions. It becomes too frightening and overwhelming for a child to feel as though their parents are unable to resolve differences and problems between one another without resorting to yelling and fighting. To a young child who still lacks the intellectual capacity to understand that not everyone is perfect and that we all tend to lose our temper from time to time cause feelings of fear, insecurity, and apprehension. Taking this into consideration, children would rather see themselves as "bad" or "at fault", thus blaming themselves in order to maintain an image of their parents as "protectors who will keep the child safe." So the first way to help the child cope with divorce is to continually support the notion that the child did not cause the divorce, nor could have prevented it.

Another important point stems from the fact that the child needs to maintain the image of their parents as "in control." While it can be very difficult to avoid arguing with your spouse in front of your child, being aware of aspects such as body language, tone of voice and facial expressions can help ease your child's worries and fears. Children tend to pick up on non-verbal cues more often than what it actually being said, so try to make sure your child is in another part of the house or asleep during a heated confrontation, especially when in the midst of a divorce situation. Even calm and civil discussions can become distressing for a child if the conversation consists of specific details such as finances and/or custody arrangements which have not been finalized. These can also be helpful for a child during the initial stage of the divorce.

Aside from the issues mentioned above, one of the most difficult tasks for parents is having to tell their children about the decision to separate. Expect each child to react differently; some will have very strong and emotional reactions while others may appear more understanding and resilient. This can depend on the child's age, gender, personality, but also on how the information is initially presented.

Here are some points to remember and keep in mind before you plan to break the news to your child:

- If at all possible, both parents should be together once they decide to tell the children. This will enable the child to feel a sense of security in seeing that his/her parents are willing and capable of being together without arguing. **Reminder:** *Do not have this discussion until the decision is final due to the feelings of worry and uncertainty this could evoke in a child.*

- If it is not possible for both parents to be together without arguing or placing blame, each should meet separately with the child and discuss beforehand what will be said. This will prevent the child from hearing two different explanations.
- Children should be given the opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns, questions and feelings. If this occurs, parents must try to make every effort to listen to their child and respond in ways that reflect the child's concerns and feelings so that the child feels heard. Questions should be addressed without blaming and/or revealing specific details such as finances. **Reminder:** *Being honest, sincere and genuine during this conversation, while limiting the child's use of any inappropriate language can help decrease the child's fears and anxiety.*
- Parents need to reassure their children that their job is to "remain children" and continue with their everyday lives including school, peers, outside activities, and yes....even chores. Children need to remember that they do not have to worry about the details of the divorce and that their parents will continue to meet their need and figure out what is in their best interests.
- The question of "what's going to happen now?" is possibly the hardest issue the child has to confront. So it is essential to keep the children informed of what will change and what will stay the same. If dad is moving out, the child should be given advanced notice before this occurs. Giving the child the opportunity to immediately visit the parent who has moved out places their worries and fears at ease with regards to that parent. This can offer the child a feeling of relief and comfort in knowing that even though their parent is alone, he or she is self-sufficient. **Reminder:** *Let the child know they will be kept informed of any upcoming changes and/or transitions.*
- A child's reaction to divorce is determined to a large degree by the reactions of each parent. Children tend to model the behavior of their parents and how they cope during difficult situations. So depending on how the parents handle the divorce transition, the manner in which they express feelings of anger and resentment along with how they present the news to the child may affect the child more than the divorce itself. **Reminder:** *The best way you can help your child is to take care of yourself, and avoid showing open hostility toward the other parent.*
- The child's age is another important factor to consider during and after the divorce is finalized. Age will be a major component in determining the best way to help the child cope with the divorce.

Infants and Toddlers

Children this age are unable to understand and comprehend the issue of divorce. However, even though they lack the ability to understand, let alone the verbal skills to even pronounce the word itself, infants and toddlers do realize that something is different. When parents exhibit anxiety, stress and tension through their body language, facial expressions and tone of voice, toddlers as well as infants sense the emotions of the parents, even if they do not know what these emotions are (or for that matter know what an emotion is). However, the child may begin to feel anxious and fearful themselves just by being attuned to their primary caregivers. Here, the most important way to help the infant and/or toddler adjust to this change is by keeping the child's life as normal as possible. Changes should be made gradually and regular, frequent visits should take place where the parent who has moved "comes to the child", if possible on a daily basis. Establishing bedtime rituals can be very helpful for both the child and the parent. These frequent visits are especially important for children this age due to the fact that they may begin to perceive the parent as "a stranger" if interactions only occur once or twice a week. Children this age will also need extra love and attention without smothering or overindulging the child.

Preschoolers

Since the cognitive abilities of children this age include what is called "magical thinking" as well as "egocentrism" where they believe the world revolves around them, they often feel that they are to blame for the divorce. Children this age also fear that any negative or "bad" thoughts they had toward the parent who moved out has come true, and now they are being punished. The ways to help children this age who are limited in their capacity to think in more "concrete" terms consist of being told repeatedly that they are not being punished nor are they responsible for what has happened between mommy and daddy. These children also need to hear that just because mommy/daddy moved away does not mean that they are unloved or unlovable. In addition, fears of abandonment and rejection are very real for children this age, so establishing a daily routine with the child by reviewing your daily schedule every morning can help relieve these fears and give the child something they can rely on. Also, expect some regressive behavior from your preschooler

in terms of temper tantrums, sleep disturbances and toilet training. The child may believe these behaviors will return him/her back to "the safety of infancy". By accepting the behavior, while applying limits and structure, can help a child cope with these changes. A security blanket could be very helpful for a child this age, especially those who are having to deal with these difficult transitions.

Elementary School-Age Children

Children this age often fear "being displaced", especially when each parent begins the process of dating. Hope for parental reconciliation, which is particularly strong during this stage of the child's development can often lead to a sense of powerlessness and lack of control possibly resulting in feelings of anger and resentment toward either the parent or the significant other. On the other hand, excessive attempts at overcompliance and submission are often seen in children who "hold in their feelings", sometimes for the purpose of "holding their parents together". This often is the cause of physical complaints such as headaches and stomach pains. So by modeling various ways of releasing emotions can help the child learn healthy and appropriate ways of self-expression. Additional approaches to assist school-age children during a divorce situation includes informing teachers about what the family is currently experiencing and monitoring your child's peer relationships. Encourage your child to contact the parent who has moved out of the home whenever they desire to do so and inquire about divorce support groups for children either through the child's school, church or community center.

Adolescents

During this stage, parents can expect reactions from their teenager, or pre-teen, such as anger, hostility, and sometimes depression; feelings similar to those of the younger aged children. The difference lies in how these feelings are expressed as well as the adolescent's struggle for more independence and separation from the family, but without having to completely give up lingering dependency needs. This normal developmental conflict along with the increase in rebellious behavior becomes much more pronounced during a divorce. In the event that household tension and family/parental fights begin to occur more frequently, teenagers are more at risk due to the fact that they are better able of finding ways to "escape". These include positive and non-harmful ways such as working outside the home or being involved in extra-curricular activities such as sports or after-school clubs. However, "adolescent escape" can take on more extreme and dangerous forms such as truancy, drug and/or alcohol use, complete detachment from the family and even unplanned/planned pregnancy. Continuing to set firm and consistent rules and limits along with supporting the need for independence such as allowing them structured peer relationships/interactions and/or participating in outside interests can help the teenager cope more effectively with the divorce. Also, letting him/her know that you are available to talk about or make an effort to address any concerns or questions they may have, while maintaining appropriate boundaries can be significantly beneficial for your teenager. In addition, both parents need to make every effort to attend school-related functions such as parent-teacher conferences as well as sporting events or various performances the child is involved in. This also includes both your school-age and preschool child.

The following is a list of various ways to help your child cope with divorce regardless of age:

- Give your child as many choices as possible in order to alleviate feelings of helplessness and loss.
- Maintain a consistent schedule which the child can rely on, incorporating daily rituals and routines that can help increase feelings of stability and safety.
- Continue to provide consistent limits, rules and structure.
- Give each child the phone number and address of the parent who moved along with opportunities to call.
- Provide specific and regular time periods, either during the afternoon or evenings, to spend with each child.

- If conflicts cannot be avoided between parents, make sure the child is unable to hear what is being said. **Reminder:** *Children model what they learn from their parents.*
- Allow each child to keep personal belongings at the homes of both parents, giving them a sense of belonging and familiarity.
- Reassure your children that the divorce was not their fault.
- Make special efforts to maintain individual relationships with each child.
- Try to avoid last minute changes in plans or visitation schedules; when last-minute changes cannot be prevented, inform the child as soon as possible.
- Reassure your child that they can continue loving the non-custodial parent. **Reminder:** *A child who wants to identify with or "be like" their parent(s) is not trying to be disloyal.*
- Avoid comparing your child with that of your ex-spouse even when similarities such as personalities, appearances and behavior are poignantly striking and difficult to observe.
- Prevent your child from becoming "the middle-man" between you and your ex-spouse. If face-to-face interactions are not possible, try phone messages, fax machines, e-mail or snail mail. **Reminder:** *Divorce does not mean you are a failure. This belief tend to result in feelings of shame which can be unknowingly passed onto the child.*

One Final Reminder:

An important aspect that parents need to be aware of is that their children are just as affected, even in some situations more than their parents, and that the child's concerns, feelings, needs and fears should be accepted and respected. The child may ask several questions regarding the reasons for the divorce, and some will want specific, detailed information which the parent may feel uncomfortable revealing; this needs to be respected and accepted by the child. If and/or when the child does not accept rational and simple responses, especially to "loaded questions", the parent's best response would be to acknowledge the child's feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, resentment or any other feelings or thoughts the child may be experiencing. This includes conveying to the child that they are still special, important and loved. So, even though he/she is not "hearing what they want to hear", they are "hearing what they need to hear."

RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

"On the Day His Daddy Left", by Eric J. Adams and Kathleen Adams, L.C.S.W.; Albert Whitman, 2000

"Please Come Home: A Child's Book About Divorce", by Doris Sanford, Multnomah Press, 1985

"Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide For Changing Families", by Laurene Krasny Brown & Marc Brown; Little Brown & Company, 1986

"It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear", by Vicki Lansky; Book Peddlers, Jan. 1998

"Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore", by Kathy Stinson; Annick Press Ltd., Sept. 1999

"At Daddy's On Saturdays", by Linda Girard; Albert Whitman & Company, 1988

"Will Dad Ever Move Back Home?", by Paula Z. Hogan; Steck-Vaughn Company, 1992

"Sometimes A Family Has To Split Up", by Jane Werner Watson, Robert E. Switzer, M.D., J. Cotter Hirschberg, M.D., Crown Publishers, Inc., 1988

"How It Feels When Parents Divorce", by Jill Krementz; Alfred A. Knopf, 1984

RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR ADULTS OF DIVORCE

"Divorce Book For Parents", by Vicki Lansky; Book Peddlers, 1989

"Does Wednesday Mean Mom's House or Dad's?", by Marc J. Ackerman, PhD; John Wiley & Sons, 1997

"For The Sake of the Children", by Kris Kline & Stephen Pew, Ph.D; Prima Publishing, 1992

"Mom's House, Dad's House", by Isolina Ricci, Ph.D; Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1980