

Helping children cope with divorce

More than 1 million children in the United States are affected by divorce each year. The primary goal of parents who get a divorce should be to minimize the emotional harm to their children. The main way to achieve this is to help children maintain a close and secure relationship with both parents. The following recommendations may help.

Reassure your children that both parents love them. Make it clear that, although you are unhappy with each other and disagree about many things, the one subject you both completely agree on is how much you love your children. Demonstrate your love by spending time with them, including time with each child individually. Preschoolers especially need lots of cuddling, but don't start bad habits like letting your children sleep with you.

Make sure your children understand that they are not the cause of the divorce. Children often believe that they somehow caused the divorce, and they feel guilty about it. Your children need reassurance that they are not in any way responsible for the breakup of the marriage.

Make it clear that the divorce is final. Some children hold on to the hope that they can somehow reunite their parents, and pretend that the separation is temporary. Making sure they understand that the divorce is permanent can help them mourn their loss and move on to a more realistic adjustment.

Keep constant as many aspects of your children's world as you can. Try to keep your children in the same house or neighborhood. If this is impossible, at least try to keep them in the same school with the same teachers, friends, and activities, even if only temporarily. The fewer changes your children experience, the better they will cope with the stress. Reassure them that although your standard of living may decrease somewhat, they will continue to have the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter.

Reassure your children that they will have visits with the non custodial parent. Your children need both parents. Young children are confused by divorce and fear that one parent may abandon them. Children need to know that they will have ongoing contact with both their father and mother. Arrange a scheduled, predictable time for visits. The custodial parent should strongly support the visiting schedule. One full day every one or two weeks is usually preferable to more frequent, brief (and rushed) visits. The non custodial parent should not try to do too much in one day.

Each of your children should spend equal amounts of time with the non custodial parent. This will prevent feelings of favoritism. Most children eagerly look forward to visits, so the non custodial parent must keep promises and be punctual. Both parents should work to make visits pleasant. Allow your children to tell you they had a good time when visiting your ex-spouse.

Give your children the telephone number of the non custodial parent. Encourage them to call at regular intervals. If the non custodial parent has moved to a distant city, regular telephone calls and letters are essential to the ongoing relationship. It is very important for the non custodial parent to remember birthdays, holidays, and other events and get in touch with the children at these times.

If the non custodial parent becomes uninvolved with the children, find substitutes. Many children will acquire a step-parent at some point. If not, ask relatives or friends to spend more time with your children, or enlist the help of volunteers from Big Brother or Big Sister programs. Explain to your children, "Your dad (or mom) can't be available for you right now. He (she) is sorting out his (her) own problems. There's not much we can do to change that." Help your children talk about the disappointment and sense of loss they feel. If your child is a teenager, writing or calling the absent parent a few times may eventually re-engage the parent.

Help your children talk about painful feelings. At the time of separation and divorce, many children become anxious, depressed, and angry. They are frequently on the brink of tears, sleep poorly, have stomach aches, or don't do well in school. To help your children get over their painful feelings, encourage them to talk about those feelings, and respond with understanding and support. Often a specific worry will need to be addressed many times before your children can lay it to rest. When anger turns into disruptive behavior, you must impose limits while you help your children put their anger into words. Books about other children of divorce who deal with feelings of loss but ultimately emerge stronger can provide reassurance. If available, a divorce discussion group at school or church can help children feel less isolated and ashamed. If symptoms interfere with functioning or persist, counseling is indicated. If you think your child needs counseling, contact our office if you need help.

Protect your children's positive feelings about both parents. Try to mention the other parent's good points; don't be overly honest about your negative feelings. You need to unload these feelings with another adult, not your children. Devaluing the other parent in your children's presence can damage their self-esteem and increase stress. Don't ask your children to take sides. They should be able to love both parents, even though you don't love each other.

Maintain normal discipline in both households. Children need consistent child-rearing. Overindulgence by one parent can make it more difficult for the other to get the children to behave. Constant competition for a child's love through special privileges or gifts can lead to a spoiled, confused, or insecure child. The ground rules about discipline should be set by the custodial parent.

Don't argue with your ex-spouse about your children in their presence. Seeing parents fight is very upsetting. It is especially important to avoid arguments about visiting, custody, or child support.

Try to avoid custody disputes. Your children need a sense of stability. Challenge custody arrangements only if the custodial parent is causing obvious harm or repeated distress to your children. False accusations of physical or sexual abuse cause great emotional anguish for children. If possible, don't split up siblings unless they are adolescents and state a clear preference for living in different households.