

Portland Pediatric Group, LLP

Divorce: Its Impact on Children

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH DIVORCE

More than one million children are affected by divorce each year. Our primary goal should be to minimize the emotional harm to these children. The main way to achieve this is to help the children maintain a close and secure relationship with both parents.

Tell your child about the separation or divorce before the actual departure of one parent. Preferably, both parents and all children should be present.

The following recommendations may be useful in helping your children cope.

1. 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 this love by spending time with your children. Preschoolers especially need lots of cuddling from both parents, but don't start bad habits like letting your child sleep with you.

2. Keep constant as many aspects of your child's world as you can.

The fewer the changes, the better your child will cope with the crisis of divorce. Try to keep your child in the same home or neighborhood. If this is impossible, at least try to keep your child in the same school with the same teachers, friends, and teams, even if only temporarily. Reassure your child that although your standard of living will decrease somewhat, you will continue to have the basic necessities of living (that is, food, clothing, and shelter).

3. Reassure your child that the noncustodial parent will visit.

Your child needs 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 their mother.

Have a scheduled, predictable time for visiting. The custodial parent should strongly support the visiting schedule. One full day every 1 or 2 weeks is usually preferable to more frequent, brief (and rushed) visits. Try not to do too much in one day. If there is more than one child, all should spend equal time or the same time with the noncustodial parent to prevent feelings of favoritism. Your child will eagerly look forward to the visits, so the visiting parent must keep promises, be punctual, and remember birthdays and other special events. Both parents

should work to make these visits pleasant. Allow your child to tell you he had a good time during the visit with your ex-spouse.

Provide your children with the telephone number of the noncustodial parent and encourage them to call at regular intervals. If the noncustodial parent has moved to a distant city, telephone calls and letters become essential to the ongoing relationship.

4. If the noncustodial parent becomes uninvolved, find substitutes.

Ask relatives or Big Brother or Big Sister volunteers to spend more time with your son or daughter. Explain to your child, "Your dad (or mom) is not capable right now of being available for you. He (she) is sorting out his (her) own problems. There's not much we can do to change that." Help your child talk about disappointment and the sense of loss. If your child is a teenager, writing and calling the absent parent may eventually reengage him or her.

5. Help your child 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 stomachaches, or don't do as well in school. To help your children get over these painful feelings, encourage them to talk about them and respond with understanding and support. A divorce discussion group at school can help children feel less isolated and ashamed.

Your child needs ample time to grieve the loss of you and your spouse as a parental unit. Allow feelings to be expressed openly and answer your child's questions honestly. When anger turns into disruptive behavior, limits must be imposed while you help your child express the anger.

6. Make sure that your children understand that they are not responsible for the divorce.

Children often feel guilty, believing that they somehow caused the divorce. Your children need reassurance that they did not in any way cause the divorce.

7. Clarify that the divorce is final.

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

8. Try to protect your child's positive feelings about both parents.

Try to mention the good points about the other parent. Don't be overly honest about negative feelings you have toward your ex-spouse. (You need to unload these feelings with another adult, not your children). Devaluing or discrediting the other parent in your child's presence can reduce your child's personal self-esteem and create greater stress.

Don't ask you child to take sides. A child does not need to have a single loyalty to one parent. Your child should be able to love both of you, even though you don't love each other.

9. Maintain normal discipline in both households.

Children need consistent child-rearing practices. Overindulgence or too much leniency by either parent can make it more difficult for the other parent to get the child to behave. Constant competition for a child's love through special privileges or gifts leads to a spoiled child. The general ground rules regarding discipline should be set by the custodial parent.

10. Don't argue with your ex-spouse about your child in the child's presence.

Children are quite upset by seeing their parents fight. Most important, avoid any arguments regarding visiting, custody, or child support in your child's presence.

11. Try to avoid custody disputes.

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

12. Books can provide reassurance and support.

Your child can read about other children of divorce who feel sad and scared but yet ultimately emerge stronger. (See the reading list under "Recommended Reading.")

CALL YOUR CHILD'S PHYSICIAN DURING OFFICE HOURS IF:

- Your child has symptoms that interfere with schoolwork, eating, or sleeping for more than 2 weeks.
- You feel your child is depressed.
- Your child has any physical symptoms, due to the divorce, that last for more than 6 months.
- Your child continues to believe that the parents will come back together again, even though over a year has passed since the divorce.

- You feel the other parent is harming your child.
- Your child refuses visits with the noncustodial parent.

RECOMMENDED READING

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE; by Mitchell A. Baris and Carla B. Garrity; Psytec, Inc., 1988

GROWING UP DIVORCED; by Linda B. Francke; Fawcett Crest, 1983

THE BOYS AND GIRLS BOOK ABOUT DIVORCE; by Richard A. Gardner; Bantam Books, 1970

THE PARENTS BOOK ABOUT DIVORCE; by Richard A. Gardner; Bantam Books, 1976