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## A Kid's Guide to Divorce

Do you know someone whose parents are divorced? Are *your* parents divorced? Chances are that you can answer yes to one - or maybe both - of those questions. And you are not alone!

Read on to find out what divorce is and what you can do to help your family, your friends, or yourself when people get divorced.

### What Is Divorce?

A divorce happens after a husband and wife decide they can't live together anymore and no longer want to be married. They agree to sign legal papers that make them each single again and allow them to marry other people if they want to.

Although that may sound simple, it's not easy for a husband and wife to decide to end a marriage. Often they spend a long time trying to solve problems before deciding to divorce. But sometimes they just can't fix the problems and decide that a divorce is the best solution.

Sometimes both parents want to divorce, and sometimes one wants to and the other one doesn't. Usually, both parents are disappointed that their marriage can't last, even if one wants a divorce more than the other.

Many kids don't want their parents to divorce. Some kids have mixed feelings about it, especially if they know their parents weren't happy together. Some kids may even feel relieved when parents divorce, especially if there's been a lot of fighting between parents during the marriage.

It's really important for kids to know that just because parents divorce each other, they're *not* divorcing their kids. Some kids think that if their parents are divorcing, it means their moms and dads will want to leave them, too.

Although it's true that the kid of a divorced couple usually lives with only one parent most of the time, the parent who lives somewhere else is still that kid's mom or dad - forever. *That will never change.*

## **Kids Can't Cause Divorce!**

There are many reasons why people divorce. Maybe they've grown apart. Maybe the love they once had for each other has changed. Maybe they fight and just can't agree about things. Every couple has their own reasons for divorce. Whatever the reasons are, one thing is for sure: *Kids don't cause divorce.*

Still, many children of divorced parents believe they are the reason their mom and dad got divorced. They think that if only they had behaved better, gotten better grades, or helped more around the house, the divorce wouldn't have happened. But this isn't true. Divorce is between moms and dads only!

Even if you once heard your parents argue about you, or your friend next door thinks his parents broke up because he got in trouble at school, these things don't cause a husband and wife to end their marriage. You may feel you're to blame for your parents' divorce, but you are not the cause. And the fact that your parents decide not to stay married is *not* your fault.

## **Kids Can't Fix Divorce!**

Just like the divorce is not the kid's fault, getting parents back together is not up to the kid, either. And most likely, this doesn't happen, although plenty of kids wish for it and even try things they think might work. Acting like an angel at home all the time (who can do that?) and getting straight As at school (another hard thing to do) may make your mom and dad happy with you, but it doesn't mean they'll get back together.

The opposite is also true. Getting in trouble so your mom and dad will have to get together to talk about these problems is not going to make the divorce go away, either. So, just be yourself and try to talk to your parents about any feelings you have.

## **But I Feel Like My Whole World Just Fell Apart!**

If your family is going through a divorce or you're helping a friend through it, there are a few important things about feelings you need to remember. First of all, it's normal to feel lots of different things, including anger, fear, and sadness.

Second, even though it may seem like your whole world just fell apart, with time, things will be better again. Your life might be a bit different, but the pieces will come back together again - maybe even sooner than you think.

Meanwhile, there are ways you can deal with the feelings you have. If you are really mad, you can punch your pillow, kick some empty boxes, go hit a baseball, or run for as long and as fast as you can. But never

take your feelings out on another person.

Telling someone how you feel can also help. If you feel really angry, say so. Talking is much better than keeping your feelings to yourself or acting all grouchy and irritable.

Sometimes just talking to someone else is a big relief. Try simply saying, "I'm so angry (or sad or worried) about my parents getting divorced! It really upsets me!" When the person who's listening can say something back to you like, "No wonder you feel that way, I totally understand why you do," it can help you feel even better. Sometimes that's all the talking someone needs to do.

Sometimes it's just the beginning of many more conversations you'll have. Talk to a parent. Or, if that doesn't feel right, find someone else you really like to talk to, maybe your brother or sister, a teacher, school counselor, neighbor, or grandparent. It's tough to let it out, but it can really help.

If you have a friend whose parents are divorcing, try to be a good listener when your friend wants to talk. Divorce is never easy.

Sometimes the feelings kids have about their parents' divorce are so strong that kids have a hard time concentrating on anything else. When kids are very sad, mad, or worried, they may have trouble paying attention in class, focusing on homework, or even remembering what they've just read. If this happens, it's especially important to get some help.

Kids may feel much better after talking to a therapist, counselor, or social worker. These adults are trained to talk with people about their problems and help with feelings that are too intense. There are also support groups in schools and other places in the community where kids can get to know other kids whose parents have divorced or are divorcing and talk about how it affects them. There are also lots of books about divorce written just for kids.

## **Life After Divorce**

When parents divorce, usually one parent moves out of the house and lives somewhere else. Some kids spend part of the time living with one parent and part of the time living with the other. Other kids live mostly with one parent and visit the other. If this is the case for you, it may seem strange at first to be visiting your own parent, but you may even start to enjoy a little time away from your everyday house. And it can feel good knowing you have two homes where someone loves you.

If you live mostly with one parent, the other parent might live close to you or far away. How often you can visit might depend partly on where everyone lives. Some kids whose parents get divorced have to move to a new home or a new neighborhood, and that can be tough, too. Often (besides the divorce that is the

major change) most other things - like your school, friends, and neighborhood - will be the same.

## **When To Speak Up**

Sometimes problems come up when kids visit one parent and then go home to the other. For example, one parent might ask a lot of questions about stuff the other parent is doing. Sometimes a parent wants the kid to be a messenger between homes. Kids usually feel uncomfortable when this sort of thing happens. They wish that parents would just ask each other what they want to know.

Kids don't want to feel like they are in the middle. If something like this happens to you, talk to your parents and tell them how it makes you feel.

## **The Future**

Wouldn't you like to know what will happen in the future? For a kid of a divorced family, it may mean stepfamilies someday. Don't expect everything to go smoothly all the time.

It can be really hard dealing with divorce, but try to remember that lots of kids go through what you're going through, and usually everything and everyone turns out fine. In fact - as bad as things might seem right now - you just might be surprised at how good the future turns out to be!

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