

Tips for Divorcing Parents

Every Family Is Different

No guide can guarantee a way to steer kids unscathed through a divorce. Every situation — and every family — is different. But some commonsense guidelines might make the adjustment a bit easier.

These suggestions can make the process less painful for kids. Parents will need to interpret them in their own ways; honesty, sensitivity, self-control, and time itself will help the healing process. Be patient — not everyone's timetable is the same.

Helping Kids Manage Their Feelings

Encourage kids to openly discuss their feelings — positive or negative — about what's happening.

It's important for divorcing — and already divorced — parents to sit down with their kids and encourage them to say what they're thinking and feeling. But you'll need to keep this separate from your own feelings. Most often, children experience a sense of loss of family and may blame you or the other parent — or both — for what they perceive as a betrayal. So, you'll really need to be prepared to answer questions your kids might raise or to address their concerns.

Make talking about the divorce and how it's affecting your kids an ongoing process. As kids get older and become more mature, they might have questions or concerns that they hadn't thought of earlier. Even if it seems like you've gone over the same topics before, keep the dialogue open.

If you feel like you get too upset to be of real help to your kids, ask someone else (a relative, maybe) to talk to them. Group programs for kids of divorce run by schools or faith-based organizations are an excellent resource for kids going through this.

It's natural for kids to have many emotions about a divorce. They might feel guilty and imagine that they "caused" the problem. This is particularly true if they ever heard their parents argue about them. Kids

may feel angry or frightened, or worried that they will be abandoned by or "divorced from" their parents.

Although kids may struggle with a divorce for quite some time, the real impact is usually felt over about a 2- to 3-year period. During this time, some will be able to voice their feelings but, depending on their age and development, other kids just won't have the words. They may instead act out or be depressed. For school-age kids, this is usually evident when their grades drop or they lose interest in activities. For younger children, these feelings are often expressed during play, too.

It may be tempting to tell a child not to feel a certain way, but kids (and adults, for that matter) have a right to their feelings. And if you try to force a "happy face," your kids may be less likely to share their true feelings with you.

Taking the High Road

Don't bad-mouth your ex in front of the kids, even if you're still angry or feuding.

This is one of the hardest things to do. But it's important not to say bad things about your ex. Doing so often backfires and kids get angry at the parent who is saying the bad things. No child likes to hear a parent criticized, even if it is by the other parent. It's equally important to acknowledge real events. If, for example, one spouse has simply abandoned the family by moving out, you need to acknowledge what has happened. It isn't your responsibility to explain the ex-spouse's behavior — let him or her do so with the kids.

Try not to use kids as messengers or go-betweens, especially when you're feuding.

Kids don't need to feel that they must act as messengers between hostile parents or carry one adult's secrets or accusations about another. Don't question your child about what is happening in the other household — kids resent it when they feel that they're being asked to "spy" on the other parent. Wherever possible, communicate directly with the other parent about relevant matters, such as scheduling, visitation, health issues, or school problems.

Expect resistance and difficulties as kids adjust to a new mate or the mate's kids.

New relationships, blended families, and remarriages are among the most difficult aspects of the divorce process. A new, blended family doesn't eliminate the impact of divorce — in fact, research shows that kids in these new families experience problems similar to those who remain with a single parent.

So, it's important to assure kids that they still have a mother and father who care for them and to help

them blend into a new family structure. Don't expect kids to accept a stepparent as another parent right away, though — that will take time. The initial role of a stepparent is that of another caring adult in a child's life. Tell kids that the stepparent needs to be respected the same way that they respect teachers, coaches, and other adults who help them.

Getting Help

Seek support groups, friendships, and counseling. Single parents need all the help they can get.

Support from clergy, friends, relatives, and groups such as Parents Without Partners can help parents and their kids adjust to separation and divorce. Kids can meet others who've developed successful relationships with separated parents and can confide in each other, while adults need special support through these trying times.

Whenever possible, kids should be encouraged to have as positive an outlook on both parents as they can. Even under the best of circumstances, separation and divorce can be painful and disappointing for many kids.

And, of course, it's emotionally difficult for the parents. So it's understandable that, despite their best intentions, some parents might broadcast their pain and anger. But parents who can foster a positive adjustment and good times, even during difficult circumstances, will go a long way toward helping their kids — and themselves — adapt and move on.

Reviewed by: W. Douglas Tynan, PhD

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