



OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE  
EXTENSION SERVICE

# Helping Children Cope: Children and Divorce

Family and Consumer Sciences

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The disruption of a family through separation or divorce inevitably has an impact on children. They may be greatly stressed by this experience and fear the loss of one or both their parents. If a parent is depressed, children can feel isolated and alone. Children can, however, adjust successfully to parents' divorce. Children struggle just as hard as their parents in trying to adjust to the changes, and are less prepared to deal with changes than adults.

## Being Open about Divorce

Parents may want to protect children from the sorrow and bitterness of a separation or divorce. In doing so, they may try to hide what is happening. But major changes need to be discussed with children. This will strengthen the parent-child relationship, lessen the children's feelings of guilt and responsibility, and open lines of communication for future talks. Here are several tips that others have found helpful:

- 1. Talk with children about what is going to happen.** Once the divorce decision has been made, do not delay informing your children. If possible, both parents should sit down and tell the children together. This shows the children that parents will work together when addressing issues facing them. The idea that both parents will be a part of their lives is reassuring.
- 2. Describe what divorce means.** Parents should tell children that they will not be loved any less. Let children know that they are not the cause of the divorce. Tell them there is nothing they can do to change the decision, and talk about what divorce means.
- 3. Explain that this decision has come after careful thought.** Parents should tell their children they have tried to improve the relationship through counseling and other measures.
- 4. Do not blame anyone.** Do not involve children in the parent's conflict. Asking children to choose sides and labeling the other parent causes additional stress on children.
- 5. Describe changes they can expect in their lives.** Discuss tentative decisions about living arrangements. Talk about issues such as when they will see the other parent, who will drive them to the movies, and who will help them with their homework.
- 6. Assure them that they will always be free to love both parents.** Assure your children that no games will be played to try to get them to reject the other parent. Likewise, parents will not allow children to play games with their affections.
- 7. Encourage children to express their feelings and ask questions.** Parents should serve as a model for children by asking questions and sharing thoughts after the divorce occurs.



Remember that the child's relationship to both parents is more important to their adjustment than the unhappiness between the parents. Try to describe ex-spouses in positive terms. However, if the ex-spouse has rejected the child, it is important that the child know this.

Don't try to hide divorce. Encourage children to talk about it with others, and join a support group at school or in the community. Help children acknowledge the difficulty that the divorce causes them. Help them realize that people can learn to deal with problems like this one.

### Common Questions Asked by Children

There is no way to shield children from the pain and loss that occurs during a divorce. Help them cope by answering questions and anticipating ones they may be afraid to ask, and admit when you don't know the answers.

Here are specific questions children might have or ask:

- "Why are you getting divorced?"
- "Will we ever be together again like before?"
- "Why can't things just be the same?"
- "Will we still have the same amount of money?"
- "Will I still be able to see both sets of grandparents?"
- "Will I still be able to see my friends?"
- "Will I have to change schools?"
- "Will I still be able to spend time with both of you?"
- "Do you still love me?"
- "Was it my fault?"
- "Where am I going to live?"

### Impact of Divorce Upon Children

How will divorce affect your child? This is difficult to answer because there is no single outcome. However, some important trends have emerged from research.

For instance, a parent's emotional health is a significant factor in a child's adjustment. It is predictable that children will push a parent to the limit. Children can be tearful, moody, restless, or have difficulty sleeping or concentrating. Most have anxiety symptoms, feel rejected, long for the absent parent, feel conflict over loyalty to one parent or the other, and many will show anger. Sometimes, recognizing these difficult behaviors and sharing feelings can offer relief during this difficult time. When parents are emotionally stable, encouraging, and supportive, children are more able to return to pleasurable activities and schoolwork.

Many parents ask at what age the child is most susceptible to problems. That isn't an easy question to answer. Generally, when parents separate:



- ★ Preschool children become more irritable and whining. Their symptoms are usually temporary as long as their physical needs are met and loving care is restored.
- ★ Five- and six-year-olds become more anxious and aggressive, restless and moody.
- ★ Seven- and eight-year-olds frequently experience sadness and grief. They may wonder who will take care of them if they are hurt.
- ★ Nine- to eleven-year-olds often direct their anger at the parent who they perceive caused the divorce.
- ★ Adolescents frequently feel anger, depression, guilt, and withdrawal. They often distance themselves as a defense against more pain.
- ★ College-age young people can also be deeply affected by their parents' divorce. They can experience deep sadness, guilt and/or depression.

Research indicates that boys seem to be more affected by divorce than girls. They experience more depression and are more intensely preoccupied with the divorce. They long for their fathers more and feel more rejected by their fathers. However, several years after the divorce, the sex of the child does not seem to be a factor in post-divorce adjustment.

## Books About Divorce Help Children

There are many books available as resources for children. Many of these books are intended to be read together with the parent involved. There are books at all age levels.

Children may or may not be willing to read the books. Don't be offended if they don't want to read about divorce. Children may be more receptive to books six months after the separation, rather than one month after. Here are some books that may be helpful:

### Preschool Age:

- *The Dinosaurs Divorce*, by Laurene and Marc Brown.
- *Where is Daddy? The Story of Divorce*, by Beth Goff.
- *My Mother's House, My Father's House*, by C. B. Christiansen.
- *Dear Daddy*, by Albert Whitman.

### Elementary School Age:

- *Why are We Getting a Divorce?*, by Peter Mayle.
- *At Daddy's on Saturdays*, by Linda Girard.
- *When Mom and Dad Separate*, by M. Heegardd.
- *The Divorce Workbook: A Guide for Kids and Families*, by Ives, Fassler & Lash.

### Pre-Teen and Teenage:

- *It's Not The End of the World*, by Judy Blume.
- *How to Survive Your Parents' Divorce, Kids Advice to Kids*, by Gayle Kimball, Ph. D.
- *How it Feels When Parents Divorce*, by Jill Krementz.
- *The Divorce Express*, by Paula Danzier.

## Maintaining Relationships

When divorced parents do not live in the same town, it can be difficult to maintain relationships. Many parents and children find letters and phone calls very important. Parents and children can also stay in contact through e-mail. Also, it is possible to exchange tape-recorded messages or songs. Parents may follow their child's interests by keeping track of sports or TV shows with which the child is involved with. In this way the parent can talk about the child's interests. When teachers send papers and artwork from school, children can share their accomplishments with both parents and can have the feeling that both parents are involved in their school.

Maintaining relationships also means including grandparents. Letters, calls, or visits can encourage lifelong memories for children, as well as joyful occasions for the older adults.

## Child Friendly Visits

It is not unusual for children to complain about visiting the non-custodial parent. They often say the other parent's house is "boring".

You can help visits become more desirable to children by:

- Allowing the children to invite friends or younger relatives, such as cousins, to go along.
- Letting the children be actively involved in planning visits.
- Paying attention to your child when they are visiting. It may mean you have to make sacrifices and drive your child to their piano recital or sports practice.

At first, drop-offs can be stressful times. With the proper planning between parents, and time, a workable pattern will emerge. To make this time less stressful on the children create rituals to help children feel secure. Here are some ideas that may be helpful:

- Remind your child 15 to 30 minutes before they are to be picked up.
- Let your child assume a degree of accountability for possessions. If an item is forgotten, then it just stays at the other house.
- Don't use drop-off or pick-up times to discuss issues with your former spouse.
- Avoid upset and conflict with a child just prior to pickup time.
- Develop a routine for beginning and ending each visit, such as always stopping at the same restaurant.

These times can be extremely stressful if you and your child's other parent are not comfortable around each other. You might want to:

- Use school or daycare as the place of transition.
- Have this exchange at a friend's or relative's house.
- Have someone you trust do it for you.
- Arrange not to be around during this time.

## Child Friendly Holidays

It is common for children to feel the intense pain of not being able to spend holidays with both parents together. It is important to make the holidays as happy a time for children as possible. When families have developed traditions and been involved in numerous

preparations before a holiday, changes can be upsetting to children.

Some holidays are easy to deal with, and others are not so easy. Typically the easy holidays are Mother's Day and Father's Day. The more difficult holidays tend to be July 4<sup>th</sup>, Labor Day, and Memorial Day. The hardest holidays to handle are Easter or Passover, Thanksgiving, and especially Christmas or Chanukkah. Often, it is the first holiday when parents are apart that are most difficult for children. As new patterns develop and some of the same traditions continue, dealing with holidays becomes easier for children and their parents.

Consider every possibility before you settle on the holiday divisions that work best. Some parents alternate holidays each year, and others divide the more important ones. It is important to remember that waiting "until next year" to celebrate with Mom or Dad is a very long time for kids to wait. Here are some child-friendly tips:

- Plan the holidays together with your former spouse, as far ahead as possible, and tell the children so they will know what to expect.
- Celebrate the eve of the holiday at one home and the day of the holiday at the other. This allows for double the holiday fun for the kids.
- Start new holiday traditions. Let the children help with the new ideas.
- Encourage children to call the other parent.
- Coordinate gift choices with your ex. spouse.

### Resources for Parents

There are many resources available to parents to help them parent through divorce. Many of these resources address ways in which parents can work together. Other topics discussed may be about what your child needs, what you can expect from your child, how you can be a better parent during this time, and strategies for coping with your child's other parent and your children.

#### Books:

- "Does Wednesday Mean Mom's House or Dad's House?" *Parenting Together While Living Apart*, by Marc Ackerman.

- *Divorce Book for Parents, Helping Your Children Cope with Divorce and Its Aftermath*, by Vicki Lansky.
- *The Good Divorce, Keeping Your Family Together When Marriage Comes Apart*, by Constance Ahrons.

#### On-line:

- The Divorce Page: <http://www.2.primenet.com/~dean/>
- Divorce Help-Directory of Self-Help Services: <http://www.divorcehelp.com/dir/do1.html>
- Divorce On-Line: <http://www.divorceonline.com>
- Divorce Talk Newsletter: <http://www.divorcetalkusa.com/divorcetalk.html>

#### Support Groups:

- Many churches within communities have support groups for divorced or divorcing parents. Call your church to find out what could be available in your community.

#### Parent Education:

- Co-Parenting Through Divorce, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.

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