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Helping Children Cope with Divorce

Every year the parents of more than one million children get divorced. Some of these children have a smoother transition through it than others. Research shows that the quality of that transition includes many factors, including the temperament, age, and gender of the child, the stability of the child's environment after the divorce, the child's ability to maintain contact



with both parents, and most importantly, the intensity of the conflict between the parents. Parents who understand how divorce impacts children can help their children adjust in a healthy way.

Telling your Child about the Divorce

One of the ways parents can begin the adjustment process for their children is telling them about the divorce in an appropriate way. First, it is important for both parents to agree about what they are going to tell the children about the divorce. Next, it is preferable that parents share the news with their children together at home where they are comfortable and have privacy and freedom to express their feelings. In this meeting include the following:

- The reason for the divorce with a brief, age appropriate explanation, not blaming either parent.
- Don't give details about adult issues including your sexual relationship or finances.
- Reassure them that you both still love them and will continue to do so.
- Reassure them that both parents will remain involved in their lives.



- Explain how the divorce will affect the details of their lives, such as their school, daycare, living situation.
- Tell them that it's normal to feel sad at first and that in time everyone will feel better.
- Comfort them and avoid placing blame.

Children's responses to divorce

Children go through a variety of responses after learning their parents are getting a divorce. They may feel sad, confused, or angry. At first, most children want their parents to reconcile and reunite the family. Acceptance of the divorce can take time and parents can take steps to help the children through this process. Author Philip Stahl, Ph.D. suggests the following:

- Parents should stay involved. Children adjust best with contact with both their parents.

- Maintain continuity in your child's life, including the same school, same activities, same social contacts.
- Avoid conflict in front of the children.
- Talk with your children. Ask them what they're afraid of, listen to their worries, and reassure them.



Helping Children Adjust

Although divorce is difficult for most children, children of divorce can grow into emotionally healthy adults capable of maintaining happy marriages of their own. This requires that the divorcing parents make it their priority to decrease the amount of conflict between them. Since high conflict between parents interrupts a child's ability to move through his or her developmental stages normally, decreasing the amount of conflict between the parents is one of the most valuable gifts divorcing parents can give their children.

Some parental behaviors are likely to add to the difficulty children experience in adjusting to the divorce in a healthy way. These behaviors to avoid include:

- Arguing in their presence.
- Making negative comments about the other parent in the presence of the children.
- Encouraging children to take sides with either parent against the other. It is imperative children are given permission and encouragement to love and have a relationship with both parents.

- Putting children in the middle and sending messages to the other parent through the children.
- Telling children about child support problems, the courts, and the judge.
- Asking children to make choices about where they want to live.

Although divorce is never easy, if parents make their children's needs a priority, the transition will be much easier for them.

Resources



Garrity, Carla. *Caught in the Middle*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

Stahl, Philip. *Parenting after Divorce*. Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 2007.

Gretchen Woosley

is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with 25 years experience providing individual and family therapy. Her current practice has a special focus on women, children and families. Her goal is to help families improve their functioning so that all members of the family can reach their full potential, becoming the persons they were meant to be.

Call or visit www.gretchenwoosley.com for more information about how she may be able to help you or someone you care about.

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