

## DIVORCE AND PARENTS

Divorcing parents are like married parents: they almost always care more about their children than anything else in the world. When kids have problems, parents can usually jump right in and help – whether it's trouble at school, with bullies, with drugs, with friends; parents like to help their children. As hard as it is, parents are almost always very, very good at being parents.

When it comes to divorce parents often choke. With their own feelings of pain, sadness, anger, and insecurity lingering so near, parents hesitate to talk with their children about divorce and the future. They don't know what to tell their children or what to do. This article tries to help with the problems divorce brings to good parents. We offer here some simple, straightforward information and advice.

Remember that more help is available, too, with a phone call. If you need more help, call our office. You can talk with an attorney – no charge – and get your questions answered. We can also refer you to several other professionals who have a lot of experience helping parents and their children through divorce.

**GOOD KIDS COME FROM GOOD PARENTING:** Parenting isn't always easy and divorce doesn't make it any easier. You're going to have a lot on your plate. You'll probably have worries about finances; what to tell friends, relatives, and neighbors and what they'll think; how you'll get by; what the future will hold . . . and on top of all of that, you'll be worried about your children. Parents worry how their divorce will impact their children. Will they suffer in school? Will it harm their friendships? Will they become depressed or antisocial? Will it lead them to substance abuse? Will it scar them forever? Will it instill in them a mistrust of marriage – or even committed relationships?

Studies show that it's not the divorce that does the damage; it's the parenting leading up to, during, and after the divorce that makes or breaks your child's well being. If you are good parents, divorce is less traumatic.

So, get a grip and stay as steady and stable as you can. When you see yourself straying from the parent you used to be, rest assured that your children see it, too. Address it. If you need help, get it.

**TELLING THE KIDS ABOUT YOUR DIVORCE - PARENTS HOW TO DO IT, WHEN TO DO IT, AND WHAT (NOT) TO SAY:** When it comes to telling the kids about your divorce, the two biggest things parents can do right are: 1) have a plan and 2) cooperate with each other. Plan what you'll say and how you'll say it. Rehearse it in a mirror. Get comfortable with the words. Get comfortable with the idea of talking about your divorce with your children. Your children probably have an idea the divorce is coming. They probably won't be shocked – but they will be confused and will probably have some pretty big worries and concerns. You need to do everything you can to minimize the drama.

**WHO SHOULD TELL THEM:** Telling the children together is a good idea if you and your spouse can do it well. Telling them together shows them that you're working together, you can be positive with each other, you don't hate each other, the kids don't have to choose sides, etc. If you have more than one child, try to tell them together, at the same time. Siblings can be great support for each other and being together when they get the news can make it a lot more tolerable.

The big problem you and your spouse face is that your kids know you better than you know yourselves. If you or your spouse holds feelings of blame for the other, your facial expressions, body language, glances, the tone in your voice, etc., will give it away to the kids. They'll see immediately who blames whom, who is hurt and who is angry with whom. They'll then have to deal with that imbalance – and that's the pressure you're trying to avoid.

**WHAT TO SAY:** Tell them what you know. Don't try to explain what you don't know. When told of the divorce, your kids will probably feel confused and afraid. They'll be worried about what will happen next. Who will be there when they get home from school? Who will take care of them? Who can they talk with? Will they get in trouble if they talk with the other parent? They'll have a million questions bouncing around in their head, but they may not ask you anything.

Don't be afraid to use the word "divorce." That's the word that you use, that's the word your spouse uses, your children deserve fair treatment. Say "divorce" if that's what you're doing. They deserve to know what's going on. If your children are too young to understand the concept of divorce, use the word anyway, and then explain it.

If you're merely separating for a while to see how things go, say so. Tell them what you know and don't speculate about uncertainties. Questions without answers are one thing, hypothetical and speculation is far worse. If you don't know whether or not you'll get divorced, you should say so.

Tell your children what they can expect. Keep it short and simple. They don't need all the details. They just need basic information. Mom and Dad still love them. They'll see both parents frequently (or not, depending on the situation). One parent will be moving out and will be staying with Gram (or whatever). They'll go to the same school. They'll stay in the same home and keep their friends. That sort of thing.

**WHEN TO TELL THEM:** Timing is important. Don't tell the kids anything until you've reached your conclusions and made your decisions. Telling the children that you're thinking about separating and maybe, maybe, getting divorced would be a disaster for them. Keep your problems to yourself until you've made a decision that will impact the kids. Then, tell them what you know and what you've decided.

Being told your parents are getting divorced is usually a pretty big shock to most children. It's huge. It's their world. So, there is no good time to break the news. You can minimize the trauma, however, by making sure they have time to absorb the information and process it before they have to face their world. Shoot for a day when there is no school – preferably for a few days. They'll be able to process the news, ask questions, and get their act together before going back to school and friends.

Breaking the news at a time when you'll be able to be around the children for a while is a good idea. They'll need to feel close to you – to both of you. Dropping a bombshell just as Dad is leaving for a weeklong business trip is a bad idea.

Breaking the news in the early daytime is probably a good idea. They'll have the day to process and calm down. Telling them just before bedtime won't work so well.

**EXPLAINING WHY:** Certainly you care why you're getting divorced; and so does your spouse. Your kids, however, don't. They don't care who cheated on whom, who gambled away the nest egg, who simply fell out of love with the other. Your kids don't care about any of that.

Most divorcing parents are flooded with concerns that their children will place blame for the divorce. You don't want them to be upset with you for ruining their family. You want them to know it wasn't your fault. Your kids don't care about any of that. Nearly always, they just want the divorce not to happen.

Children of divorcing couples nearly always have reunification fantasies. These are normal and healthy. Kids may ask, "why are you getting divorced," but they're not looking for reasons or blame. They're trying to make sense of their world; exploring if there is some way the situation can be reversed to save the life they've known.

Incidentally, placing blame will only hurt your children. Work with your spouse to present a united front. Couch explanations with “we” statements: “we’ve decided . . .” “we weren’t getting along . . .” “we know it has to be this way . . .”

**SINGLE PARENTING:** Once you’ve decided on a divorce, figure out a parenting plan as soon as possible. Start putting together your resources and build up your support network. As a test, figure out how you’ll get through an entire month without any assistance from the other parent. How and when will you: grocery shop, cook the meals, do the dishes, clean the house, do laundry, pay bills, mow the lawn, get the car in for repairs, correspond with friends, get out to a movie without the kids, take care of a sick child home from school, get the kids to the doctor, take care of the kids when you’re sick, get yourself to the doctor, etc.?

**BEING ALONE:** You’re probably used to parenting with your partner. You jabbered on about your baby’s first words, first steps, major accomplishments, minor accomplishments, and mundane activities. Parents go on endlessly about how their child’s sleep! It won’t be like that for you anymore. You won’t be able to entirely fill the gap left in your life – and your parenting – by the absence of the other parent, but you can minimize its impact.

Build up a support network. Call in other family members. Your kids are your kids, but they are also someone else’s grandchildren, nieces, nephews, cousins, etc. Meet other divorcing parents. They know what you’re going through. They’ve found solutions to some of the problems you face. You have solutions for their problems, as well. They can be a great source of contacts and information for other support needs. Don’t be shy.

**SAME SEX PARENTS:** In our practice we’ve found that many mothers worry about the impact that a fatherless household will have on their sons. The situation exists to some degree with single fathers raising daughters, but the mother-raising-a-son-alone situation is a real concern for many moms. Fortunately, the concerns seem largely without merit. Children learn about gender roles from everything in their world. They learn about gender roles at school, at church, on television, at the movies, when playing with their friends, from their friends’ families. Ensuring your child will properly identify with, and grow into, his or her gender role isn’t something parents control.

**MAKING TIME:** Your children are going to need you. They will take a lot of your time. The parenting that used to be shared will now fall to only one of you, one day at a time. Brace yourself for their needs and prepare a schedule.

**KEEP THE KIDS OUT OF IT:** There’s not much to say here – it’s pretty straightforward. Your children don’t want any part of your divorce. They don’t want to serve as mediators. They don’t want to serve as judges. They’re not going to choose sides. Don’t put your kids in the middle. If you try, your efforts will almost certainly backfire. Your kids may fall in line and agree to be on your team for a while, or agree to place blame for the divorce for a while. Eventually, though, they’ll drop the commitment and will probably resent you for playing the game. The one thing you can be sure of though, is that you’ll end up hurting your children. Leave them out of it.

**INTRODUCING NEW PARTNERS:** Don’t rush in to introducing your new “friend” to the children. They’ve got plenty on their plate and they probably just can’t handle it. Wait a reasonable time until the divorce is concluded before making any introductions. Your lawyer and the judge may say the case is concluded, but there’s no magic line that kids cross to symbolize the end of the family. Their family is still in their heads and you need to respect that.

**STEPPARENTING:** The role of stepparent is nearly impossible to fill. Most remarried divorcees see their new spouse as much a parent as their former spouse. Most stepparents acknowledge, however, that they have few tools and little real authority in the rearing of the children. Communication between the new spouses is of paramount importance. In the best of all worlds, communication between the stepparent and former spouse will be free flowing and not antagonistic.

The most important thing is to have a clear understanding of everyone's roles, responsibilities, and authority in rearing the children. The parents must communicate their understanding to the children and present a united and consistent front in supporting the stepparent. When in doubt, talk it out.

**RECOMMENDED READING:**

**Why Did You Have to Get a Divorce, and When Can I Get a Hamster?** Anthony Wolf, Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

**Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child**, Isolina Ricci, Fireside.

**Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids: Feeling at Home in One Home or Two**, Isolina Ricci, Fireside.

**What to Expect: The Toddler Years.** Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi Murkoff and Sandee Hathaway, Workman Publishing Company  
Mom's House, Dad's House

**Growing up with Divorce, Healing Your Child Avoid Immediate and Later Emotional Problems.** Neil Kalter, Fawcett Colubine Book, published by Ballentine Books.

**How to Talk to Your Children About Divorce**, Jill Jones-Soderman, Sheila Steinberg, and Allison Quattrocchio, Family Mediation Center Publishing Co.