

Separation and Divorce: Keeping Your Children First

Whether married, living together, or living apart, most parents hope to remain together when they have a child. Despite those intentions, parental separation and divorce affect nearly half of American families.

For many children, separation and divorce can be as difficult as the death of a parent. Children need the guidance, patience, and love of both parents to help them through.

Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about parenting through separation and divorce.

Put your child first

How much a separation or divorce will affect your child's life depends largely on how you and your co-parent treat each other before, during, and after the separation or divorce. Parents must work together to make the transition as easy as possible. Even though the relationship ends, your role as a parent continues. Set aside your differences and *put your child first*.

Here are suggestions on how to put your child first.

- **Never force your child to take sides.** Every child will have loyalties to both parents. Children naturally love both their parents, and they know that parts of each parent go into making them.
- **Talk about concerns with your child's other parent in private.** Make sure your child cannot overhear your conversations. Also, avoid fighting in front of your child and make sure your child cannot hear you. This step includes making phone calls, texts, and other forms of electronic communication private.
- **Do not involve your child in arguments between the two of you.** Do not let your child get caught in the middle of custody and child support disagreements. If you are having custody disagreements, consider contacting a mediator to help settle them. Mediators can be found by contacting a lawyer or family court. For questions about child support, visit the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support Enforcement website at www.acf.hhs.gov/css/parents.
- **Do not criticize each other in front of your child or when your child might overhear you.** If this type of criticism happens, explain to your child that when people get angry, they sometimes say things that are hurtful.
- **Don't make your child the messenger.** Whether the matter involves scheduling, picking up items from the other house, or finances, find a way to communicate directly with your co-parent. If your child is put in the middle and something goes wrong, they can easily feel at fault.
- **Discuss your concerns and feelings with your child's other parent when and where your child cannot hear.** Avoid fighting in front of your child.

Help your child adjust

There are many things you can do to help your child adjust to the changes in your family.

Talk with your child early and often

The earlier you tell your child what is happening and the more often you talk, the more comfortable they will feel. Also, allow your child

to share their fears, worries, and feelings with you. This step can help them feel safe and special. When talking with your child about the separation or divorce, follow these guidelines.

- **Be completely honest and open** about what is going to happen. Talk about the separation or divorce in simple terms—for example, "Your dad and I are having some trouble getting along" or "Your mother and I are thinking we need to live apart from each other."
- **Make sure your child knows the separation or divorce is not their fault.** Also, tell them that they can't fix the problems or help the two of you stay together. Reassure your child that you love them and will not leave them.
- **Try not to blame your ex-partner** or show your anger. Explain that parents sometimes need to live separately. This step includes never telling your child the specifics of what happened to cause the separation unless your child already knows or a serious safety issue is involved—for example, domestic violence, criminal activity, or drug dependence.
- **Be patient with questions.** You do not need to have all the answers. Sometimes just carefully listening to your child is more helpful than talking. Following are questions your child might ask:
 - Why are you getting separated or divorced?
 - Will you ever get back together again?
 - Where am I going to live?
 - Will we have to move?
 - Will I need to change schools?
 - Was the separation or divorce my fault?
 - How often will I see (the other parent)?
 - Are we going to have less money?

Reassure your child that they are safe and loved. If needed, don't hesitate to get help from your child's doctor or a family counselor.

Allow your child to be a child

Resist using your child to replace your former partner. Avoid putting pressure onto your child with statements such as "You are the man/woman in the family now" or "Now I have to depend on you." Children have a right to enjoy childhood and grow up at a typical pace. As they grow older, they will be able to take on more responsibility and help around the house. Don't expect too much too soon.

Respect the relationship between your child and the other parent

It is important to let your children show their love to both parents. Unless your ex-partner is unfit to parent, try not to let your differences keep your children away from them. Children should be allowed to spend time with their other parent without feeling guilty. Reassure your children that you both still love them, even though they may be living with only one parent at a time.

Keep your child's daily routine

Try to keep your child's routine, friends, school, and environment as unchanged as possible. Schedule meals, chores, and bedtime at regular times so your child knows what to expect each day. Parents living separately should agree on a set of consistent rules for both

households. It is also very important to live up to your promises to visit or spend time with your child. A routine weekly or monthly schedule may be comforting to your child.

Be aware of different reactions

Reactions to a separation or divorce can vary depending on your child's age, gender, temperament, past experiences, and family support. Following are typical ways that your child may react. If any of these behaviors become excessive, talk with your child's doctor.

Preschool-aged children may

- Be sad
- Be afraid of others
- Not want to be separated from one parent
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Have trouble toilet training
- Have outbursts or tantrums
- Act more "babyish"
- Blame themselves for the separation or divorce

School-aged children may

- Be moody or angry
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Seem distracted and faraway
- Not do as well as usual in school
- Have tantrums
- Revert to more immature behavior
- Be more aggressive or angry
- Express their sadness and wish for their parents to get back together
- Worry they may be the cause of the separation or divorce
- Worry about divided loyalty to their parents

Adolescents may

- Withdraw emotionally from family or friends
- Become aggressive or angry
- Engage in risky behaviors such as sex or use of drugs
- Try to become an adult and take charge of the family
- Worry about money
- Worry they may be the cause of the separation or divorce
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Feel depressed

Accept help from others

Children often turn to neighbors, grandparents, and friends for comfort and attention. These relationships can offer support and can be very helpful to children as they adjust to a separation or divorce. Teachers or school social workers should be made aware of a change in the family so they can let you know whether any problems arise in school. It's also important for your child's school to know whom to contact for permission for special activities or in an emergency.

Separation and divorce are not always easy for parents either. Don't be afraid to visit a counselor if you are having trouble adjusting. It is important for parents to stay healthy so they can be available to their children during this difficult time. Social agencies, mental health centers, women's centers, and support groups for single parents are helpful. There are also many informative books and articles about separation and divorce for both parents and children. Also, your child's doctor is very aware of the effects that separation and divorce may have on emotions and behavior. Their doctor can help you find ways to cope with the stress you and your children are feeling.

Remember

If you have any concerns or questions, contact your child's doctor. Also, for more parenting information visit www.HealthyChildren.org.

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