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Family Life

Adjusting to Divorce

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My spouse and I are getting divorced. How can we help our children adjust?

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

- **Never force your child to take sides.** Every child will have loyalties to both parents.
- **Do not involve your child in arguments** between the two of you.
- **Do not criticize each other in front of your child** or when your child might overhear you. If this happens, explain to your child that when people get angry they sometimes say things that are hurtful.
- **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.**

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 he will feel. Also, allow your child to share his fears, worries, and feelings with you. This can help make him feel safe and special. When talking with your child about the divorce, follow these guidelines.

- **Be completely honest and open** about what is going to happen. Talk about the divorce in simple terms. For example, "Your dad and I are having some trouble getting along," or "Your mother and I are thinking we may need to separate."
- **Make sure your child knows the divorce is not his fault.** Also tell him that he can't fix the problems or make the two of you stay together. Reassure your child that you love him and will not leave him.
- **Try not to blame your ex-spouse** or show your anger. Explain that parents sometimes need to live separately.
- **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 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 divorce my fault?
- How often will I see Daddy/Mommy?
- Are we going to be poor?

Reassure your child that he is safe and loved. If needed, don't hesitate to get help from your pediatrician or a family counselor.

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-spouse is unfit to parent, try not to let your differences keep your children away from him or her. 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 only be living with 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 that 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.

Use Help from the Outside

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 divorce. Teachers or school social workers should be made aware of a divorce so they can let you know if 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.

Divorce is not always easy for parents either. Don't be afraid to see a counselor if you are having trouble adjusting to a divorce. 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 divorced or single parents are helpful. There are also many informative books and articles about divorce for both parents and children. Your pediatrician is very aware of the effects that separation and divorce may have on emotions and behavior. He or she can help you find ways to cope with the stress you and your children are feeling.

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