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Divorce is stressful for parents and children alike. Although children's emotional reactions usually depend on their age at the time of the divorce, many children experience feelings of sadness, anger, and anxiety - and it's not uncommon for these feelings to be expressed in their behavior. Often, the child's emotional reaction can be quite different than the parent's, and it's important to understand these differences. For example, a parent may feel a sense of relief that a difficult period is coming to some resolution, whereas the child may feel a sense of loss.

Fortunately, there are things you can do to help your child during a divorce. By minimizing the stress the situation creates and responding openly and honestly to your child's concerns, you can help your child through this difficult time.

**Telling Your Child About Divorce**

As soon as you're certain of your plans, talk to your child about your decision to divorce. Although there's no easy way to break the news, both parents should be present when a child is told, and feelings of anger, guilt, or blame should be left out of the conversation. At best, this is a difficult message to communicate, but if you handle it sensitively, you can help make it less painful for your child.

Although the discussion about divorce should be tailored to your child's age and development, all children should receive the same basic message: "Mommy and Daddy used to love each other and were happy, but now we're not happy and have decided we'd be happier apart. What happened occurred between us, but we will always be your parents and we will always be there to love and take care of you."

It's important to emphasize that your child is in no way to blame for the breakup and that the unhappiness is not related to him or her. Children tend to blame themselves for the failure of their parents' marriages, and they need to be reminded frequently that it is **not** their fault. Finally, your child may question whether your



love for him or her is temporary (because it was with your spouse); reassure your child that even though you're getting a divorce, you love him or her permanently and unconditionally.

When it comes to answering questions about your divorce, it's important to give kids enough information so that they're prepared for the upcoming changes in their lives but not so much that it frightens them. Try to keep your feelings neutral and answer your child's questions in an age-appropriate way and as truthfully as possible. Remember that kids don't need to know all the details; they just need to know enough to understand clearly that although divorce means separating from a spouse, it doesn't mean parents are divorcing their kids.

Not all children react the same way when told their parents are divorcing. Some ask questions, some cry, and some have no initial response at all. For kids who seem upset when you break the news, it's important for parents to let them know that they recognize and care about their feelings and to reassure them that it's OK to cry.

For example, you might say, "I know this is upsetting for you, and I can understand why," or "We both love you and are so sorry that our problems are causing you to feel this way." If your child doesn't have an emotional reaction right away, let him or her know that there will be other times to talk.

Most children are concerned with how the divorce will affect them:

- Who will I live with?
- Will I move?
- Where will Mommy live or where will Daddy live?
- Will I go to a new school?
- Will I still get to see my friends?
- Can I still go to camp this summer?

Be honest when addressing your child's concerns and remind him or her that the family will get through this, even though it may take some time.

### **Reducing Your Child's Stress**

Divorce brings with it a lot of changes and a very real sense of loss. Kids - and parents - grieve the loss of the kind of family they had hoped for, and children especially grieve the loss of the presence of a parent. That's why some kids - even after the finality of divorce has been explained to them - still hold out hope that their parents will someday get back together. Mourning the loss of a family is normal, but over time both you and your child will come to some sort of acceptance of the changed circumstances.

So, how can you decrease the stress your child feels over the changes brought on by divorce? Mainly by learning to respond to his or her expressions of emotion. Here are some ways divorcing parents can help their children:

- **Invite conversation.** Children need to know that their feelings are important to their parents and that they'll be taken seriously.
- **Help them put their feelings into words.** Children's behavior can often clue you in to their feelings of sadness or anger. Let them voice their emotions and help them to label them, without trying to change their emotions or explain them away. You might say: "It seems as if you're feeling sad right now. Do you know what's making you feel so sad?" Be a good listener when they respond, even if it's hard for you to hear.
- **Legitimize their feelings.** Saying things like, "No wonder you feel sad" or "I know it feels like the hurt may never go away, but it will" lets kids know that their feelings are valid. It's important to encourage children to get it all out before you start offering ways to make it better.
- **Offer support.** Ask, "What do you think will help you feel better?" They might not be able to name something, but you can suggest a few ideas - maybe just to sit together for a while, take a walk, or hold a favorite stuffed animal. Younger kids might especially appreciate an offer to call Daddy on the phone or to make a picture to give to Mommy when she comes at the end of the day.

Expect that your child's adjustment could take a while. Some emotional and behavioral reactions to the stress of divorce last for months or even a year. Some may be much more temporary, lasting only until the situation stabilizes and a child's routine can be re-established.

It's also important to remember that these responses do **not** necessarily indicate permanent problems. Much of the time, kids' emotional concerns following divorce are temporary if handled with sensitivity. But sometimes, children have a longer response. Being attentive to the signs your child sends about his or her feelings can help you to help your child cope with them.

### **Reactions to Stress**

Below are some signals that represent a child's reaction to stress at various ages:

#### **Babies and Toddlers**

Children this age require consistency and routine and are comforted by familiarity. They may be distressed by unpredictable schedules, too many transitions, or abrupt separations.

Signals that an infant is feeling distressed include increased amounts of fussiness or crying and changes in eating or sleeping habits. Babies and toddlers are also sensitive to separations. They may show signs of separation anxiety through withdrawn, distressed, or clingy behavior.

### **Preschoolers and Kindergartners**

Kids this age need consistent caregiving. But as children develop long-term memory and language skills, they become more self-reliant.

Signals that a child in this age group is under stress include continued worries about separation and regression to earlier behaviors, such as thumb sucking, bedwetting, and problems sleeping through the night.

Fussiness and anger at you or your spouse may also occur. A child may cry frequently, engage in power struggles, regress to "baby" behaviors, and have tantrums.

### **School-Age Children**

Between 6 and 8 years, children need individual time with each parent to continue being reassured that they're loved. Fairness becomes an important issue; your child may want to be sure both you and your spouse get the same amount of time with him or her. Children this age are also interested in issues such as who is to blame or who is at fault.

If your child expresses hope of reuniting your family, make sure he or she spends time with both of you separately to help cement the reality of the situation. Children do, however, maintain this hope of reunification for years. Although parents need to acknowledge their kids' hopes and how they're feeling, they also need to remind them of the reality of the situation.

Your child's feelings of unhappiness may be expressed as sadness, anger, or aggression. He or she may have problems with friendships or in school. Or, stress may take the form of physical problems, such as upset stomachs or headaches.

### **Preteens**

Between 9 and 12, children become more involved with activities apart from their parents. When divorced parents reside close to one another, equal time-sharing may work, but preteens may need different schedules to accommodate their changing priorities. School, community interests, and friendships become more important for children in this age range, but the impact of family remains critical.

Your child may refuse to share time with you and your spouse equally and may try to take sides. Expect this behavior and don't take it personally when it occurs. Maintain the visitation schedule, and emphasize the involvement of both parents in your child's life.

Warning signs for this age group include peer difficulties, loneliness, depression, anger, or physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches and learning problems.

Role reversals - when kids feel compelled to support or care for an emotionally distraught parent at their own emotional expense - can also arise. This is **not** a healthy situation for the child. Parents who recognize role reversal in their family need to find ways to

get emotional support for themselves and relieve the burden from their child.

### **Teens**

During the early teen years, kids need consistent support from both parents, but may not accept equal time-sharing of their living arrangements because it may interrupt their school and social lives. Be prepared for your child's thoughts on time-sharing.

Kids sometimes propose spending an entire summer, semester, or school year with the noncustodial parent. But this may not reflect that they want to move. In the early teens, kids do have a good sense of time and a realization that adult life is approaching. Often, a child will spend a year with the other parent and then return home. They view this as a chance to spend a lot of time with the parent they've missed. Listen to and explore these options if they're brought up.

Whatever arrangements are made, make a schedule and stick to it. Adolescents may externalize blame for the divorce to one or both parents and may become controlling by demanding to stay in one place or to switch residences constantly.

As teens get older, they become more focused on social and school activities, as well as establishing their independence; so they may become less interested in their parents' problems. But your teen still needs your support. Even though parents often get the impression that their input isn't important to adolescents, it is. Stay involved in your child's life and interests. Talking frequently with your teen is helpful.

And although teens may want to see their parents happy, children of any age may have mixed feelings about seeing their parents dating other people. They may feel that condoning parental dating would be disloyal to the other parent, but they may be happy that their parent has found someone new.

Depression, moodiness, acting out, poor performance in school, use of alcohol or other drugs, sexual activity, or chronic oppositional behavior can all signal that a teen is having trouble. Older teens may have behavior problems, exhibit depression, show poor school performance, run away from home, or get into trouble with the law. Regardless of whether such troubles are related to the divorce, they are serious problems that affect a teen's well-being and indicate the need for outside help.

### **Fighting in Front of Your Child**

Although the occasional argument between parents is reasonable and even expected in a healthy family, living in a battleground of continual hostility and unresolved conflict can place a heavy psychological burden on your child. Traumatic events like screaming, fighting, arguing, or violence can make children fearful and apprehensive. Unable to deal with these fears, your child may become emotionally upset, controlling, or withdrawn.

Witnessing your hostility also presents an inappropriate behavioral

model for your child, who's still learning how to deal with his or her own impulses. Children's long-term adjustment to divorce is highly related to ongoing hostility between parents. Kids whose parents maintain anger and hostility are much more likely to have continued emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Talking with a mediator or divorce counselor can help divorcing couples air their grievances and hurt to each other in a way that doesn't cause harm to the children. Though it may be difficult, working together in this way will spare your child the harm caused by continued bitterness and anger.

### **Adjusting to a New Living Situation**

Because divorce can be such a big change in your child's life, adjustments in living arrangements should be handled gradually.

There are several types of living situations to consider:

- one parent (either you or your spouse) may have custody
- you may have joint custody (in which both you and your spouse share in the legal decisions about your child, but your child lives primarily with one of you and visits the other)
- shared joint custody (in which decisions are shared and so is physical custody)

It's becoming increasingly common for parents who live close by to share custody of their child. There's no simple solution to this. Although some children can thrive spending half their time with each parent, others seem to need the stability of having one "home" and visiting with the other parent.

Whatever arrangement you choose, your child's needs should always come first. Avoid getting involved in a tug of war as a way to win over your former spouse. When deciding how to handle holidays, birthdays, and vacations, stay focused on what's best for your child.

### **After the Divorce**

It's important to maintain as much normalcy as possible after a divorce by keeping regular routines, including meal routines, rules of behavior, and methods of discipline. Relaxing limits, especially during a time of change, tends to make children insecure. Resist the urge to drop routines and spoil a child who's grieving over a divorce. The only way a child should be spoiled is with unconditional love.

Parents should also work hard to keep their parental roles in place. Your child, no matter how much he or she tries to understand, is still a child. If you confide in your child, he or she may have difficulty relating to the other parent. This means not blaming the other parent or putting your child in the middle of an adult situation that he or she doesn't have the maturity to handle.

Consistency in routine and discipline across the households is important. Similar expectations regarding bedtimes, rules, and homework will reduce anxiety and give your child the message that you and your ex-spouse are working together and can't be manipulated.

Don't be ashamed to ask for professional help. Divorce is a major life crisis for a family. But if you and your former spouse can work together, you can continue to be good parents to your child.

Here are some other recommendations to keep in mind.

- Get help dealing with your own painful feelings about the divorce. If you're able to make a healthy adjustment, your child will be more likely to do so, too. Also, getting needed emotional support and being able to air your feelings and thoughts with an adult will lessen the possibility of your child shouldering the unfair burden of your emotional concerns. This may include trusted friends or family members or a therapist.
- Be patient with yourself and with your child. Emotional concerns, loss, and hurt following divorce take time to heal and often happen in phases. That's healthy.
- Resist the temptation to make up for the child's loss with material things, food treats, or special privileges. Emotional hurt is best healed with care and support from loved ones, not things.
- Recognize the signals of stress for your child's age. Consult your child's doctor or a child therapist for guidance on how to handle specific problems you're concerned about.

Many of the elements that help children thrive and be emotionally healthy in an intact family are the same ones that help children thrive and be emotionally healthy members of a divorced family. With good support, children can and do successfully make the adjustment to divorce.

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