



Helping Kids Adjust During a Divorce

Divorce is not easy for parents or children. In order for parents to best help their children, they should check in with their own emotions (particularly the emotion of guilt) and realize that divorce is nothing to be ashamed of. In many cases, it is better for everyone involved to sever a relationship that is no longer serving a happy, healthy, sustainable environment. Most children will actually notice less upset and anxiety when parental discord is eliminated. Here are some strategies for handling the challenges ahead:

1. Explain the divorce in a simple, straightforward way. The discussion should fit the child(ren)'s age/maturity/temperament. When possible, both parents should talk over how to explain the situation and have the discussion with the children jointly.
2. Reassure the child(ren) that they will always have the love of both parents and explain how things will work moving forward (i.e. scheduling, living situations, etc.). Putting up a calendar can help children feel reassured they will see, and spend time with, both parents. Keep up the child's daily routines and consistency at both residences.
3. Common questions that will arise: Who will I live with?, Where will I go to school?, Will I move?, Where will each parent live?, Where will we spend holidays?, Will I still get to see my friends?, etc. Answer their questions as openly and truthfully as possible.
4. Talk about emotions that are coming up for the child(ren). Encourage them to have an open dialogue with both parents about any feelings they may have. You could explain, "It is normal to feel upset, sad, and angry about a divorce. When you feel this way- use your words and tell Mom or Dad " I need to talk", or "I feel sad", and we will help you!"
5. Reassure the child(ren) that the divorce is not their fault. They need to know that adults have made this decision and it has nothing to do with them.
6. Avoid legal talk and talking badly about the other parent and/or blaming the other even if you are angry, in front of children. Children need/love both of their parents and can easily experience loyalty conflict and behavioral problems if conflict and hostility is constantly present.
7. Inform the child(ren)'s teachers of the situation. Although this is a private and difficult situation, keeping the teachers informed will help. The teacher can be more sensitive to your child's needs and help with keeping the parent informed of changes in behavior.
8. A parenting expert, online resources, support groups, or family therapist with experience with divorce can be very helpful resources. Children can also gain a great deal from talking to a therapist on their own.
9. Children can act up, withdraw, and regress when their family is going through a divorce. They may wet the bed, refuse to listen, and lash out. Over time, these happenings will dissipate but they will need extra support, open communication, and time.