

CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

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CHILDREN'S NEEDS IN DIVORCED FAMILIES

Need for Family Relationships

- Children benefit from having relationships with each parent as well as with members of their extended families. Children deserve to have as many support people as possible.

Needs within each Parent's Home

Children should...

- Have their personal sleeping area with space for their things.
- Be safe and secure at all times – supervised by parents or appropriate care providers.
- Have parents who are up-to-date in the children's medical, dental, education, and legal issues and have items on hand the children need.
- Be kept from exposure to illegal substances, illegal activities, pornography, violence.
- Be parented without interference from the other parent.
- Have adequate food and nutrition.
- Feel safe and loved.

Need for the Freedom to Love Each Parent

Children should never be...

- Pressured by one parent for information about the other.
- Told to carry messages back and forth between parents.
- Asked to make decisions about things of which parent have the job to decide, especially regarding custody and visitation.
- Told anything degrading about the other parent.
- Made to feel that they have to take sides with or defend either parent.
- Exposed to arguing between parents.

HOW AND WHEN TO TELL THE CHILDREN YOU ARE DIVORCING

If children are able to see that something is different and ask questions about those differences, they deserve to be told something. What they are told depends on their age and maturity. Even very young children deserve answers to questions about why the parents are not together anymore. Here are some tips:

- Never blame the other parent. "Your Father is bad, so he had to go away."
- Help them understand the divorce is just between the parents – the children will not be left by either parent.
- Make it clear that they did not do anything to cause the divorce.
- Reassure them that both parents love them and always will.
- Explain future changes like transport to school, two homes, etc.
- Use a calm voice to help reduce their anxiety.
- Make this a 'sit-down' conversation and take the time to answer their questions.
- Don't let the children see you crying/angry about the divorce.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT AFTER YOU TELL THEM

Children may feel many emotions and these emotions may change over time. Here are some common feelings children have when their parents' divorce.

GRIEF Children typically feel sad when their parents' divorce. They may become depressed. Watch for signs of sleep problems, extreme restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and other changes in their behaviors.

ANXIETY Children may begin to worry. They may worry about money and fear having to move out of their home. Some worry about being abandoned by the parent who has left the home. Others may become afraid that one or the other parent is suffering.

REJECTION Children sometimes feel that they have been rejected by the absent parent.

ANGER Some children feel so much tension and anxiety that they become angry at one or both parents and may become aggressive in their language and/or behaviors.

AFRAID TO SPEAK OUT Children may feel that they are betraying a parent if they speak about loving the other parent, or share something they did with the other parent that they enjoyed.

LONELY It is very common that children feel lonely for the parent who has left the home.

BETRAYAL Children may feel betrayed if one or both parents become involved with a new partner – especially so if that parent has more children with the new partner and/or if a parent has new step-children.

SCHOOL PROBLEMS Do not be surprised if the children begin either acting out at school or if their grades drop. It is very difficult for them to concentrate in school when they are feeling so many different emotions due to the divorce.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN

Set aside time every day to simply sit with them. One good way is to sit with them while they have an after school snack.

Learn how to listen without asking them questions. In time, you will see that they will begin to speak freely with you if you are not peppering them with questions like 'How was school today?' 'Do you have homework?' 'What did you do at your Dad's house?' 'What does your mom's boyfriend look like?'

Assure them of your love through your actions. Spend time with them in activities like walking, playing a board game or cards, hiking, biking, eating without telephone or tv interference, going to school conferences, etc. This proves you want to spend time with them.

Don't introduce a new partner too soon. Should that new partner leave the relationship, the children may feel abandoned. Only introduce a new partner if you and your partner are sure you are ready to make a long-term commitment to each other.

Remember, they are not there to comfort you. Do not use your children as mini-adults whom you tell your fears and concerns to. That is too much of a burden for them. Find either a counselor or another adult who can help you with your feelings.

Provide them with counseling if they are struggling. Schools may provide this service.

Do everything you can to make sure they keep a connection with their other parent. This is one of the most important things you can do! Do not sabotage that relationship.

YOUR ATTITUDE IS IMPORTANT

You need to...

Accept that your children will now have two homes.

Accept that your children are going to have new people in their lives. They may now have step parents, step grandparents, step siblings, etc. Do not assume that these people are inappropriate. Instead, see this as an opportunity for your children to have more people who come to love and support them.

Get past your denial and anger. Accept that the divorce has occurred. Begin to create a new life for yourself. There are counselors and support groups who are very helpful with this.

Develop a mature attitude towards co-parenting with your ex-partner. It is pointless to pick that person's parenting apart. Naturally, their style will be somewhat different from yours. They will feed the children different foods, their housekeeping may not be up to your standards, they will have different household rules, etc. Unless the children are in danger, it is simply not your business.

Stop any obsessive behaviors towards your ex-partner or their new partner. Driving by their home, checking out their social media posts, harassing them with telephone calls – behaviors like that should have ended in our teen years. They accomplish nothing other than making a bad situation worse and could even result in criminal charges against you.

Stop placing all the blame for the divorce upon your ex-partner. (Yes, it really does take two.) Instead, think about how you contributed to the break-up. Stop dwelling on the past and, instead, invest your energy in self-improvement. This much wiser use of time will help prepare you for a healthy relationship in the future.

Keep in mind that divorce is not a competition between two parents for the children's affection. Children have the capacity to love more than one parent, more than one set of grandparents, and more than one set of extended family members. Do not keep other loving relationships from your children.

Finally, and very importantly, ...

It does not matter how your ex-partner behaves towards you or the divorce. You are an adult. Their poor behavior does not give you permission to act in the same manner. The children need and deserve at least one parent who role models mature and rational behaviors.