



## Guide for Helping Your Child Cope with Divorce



Coping with divorce is difficult for parents as well as children and no one child's experience with divorce is the same. Children are separate individuals from their parents and they deserve to be respected for the role they play as family members. This is a time when both parents and children are faced with various challenges and having to adjust their lifestyle. Research has shown that more often than not, when going through a divorce or after a divorce, parents are predominantly consumed by their own feelings of distress and tend to neglect the emotional and psychological needs of the children. It is important therefore for parents to pay attention to their children's feelings, so as to be able to help them cope effectively with the change.

For children, this may be a time when they experience stress, confusion, fear, guilt, anger, sadness, depression, decline in academic performance, sleep or eating problems or acting out. At this time, also, children may be unsure of how they feel about their parents' separation, and therefore would need the help of their parents to process this new development and cope effectively with it. As a parent, therefore, you can help lessen the pain by intentionally paying attention to the needs of your children and helping them to maintain the stability that they are dreadful of losing.

It is understandable for you as a parent to feel unsure of what to do to help your child cope with divorce. However, it is possible if you can learn to provide support with a positive reassuring attitude. This can be achieved in many ways such as making your children your top priority, being patient and willing to listen them when they need someone to talk to, maintaining a regular routine and if possible, maintaining a cordial relationship with your ex. Specific ways of helping your child through a divorce are discussed below:

### How do I/We Tell the Children?

This for sure is not an easy task for any parent, but there are a few things that you could do to make it less stressful for you and the children:

- Be sure not to delay talking to your children for too long after the decision has been made, as prolonging the discussion may result in the loss of their trust. However, before breaking the news, you must ensure that alternative living arrangements have been put in place. Also, be sure that you are well prepared by dealing with your own anxieties and planning what you are going to say to them.
- Show that you respect your children's feelings by choosing a familiar and comfortable place and a time that does not interfere with the children's usual activities. Also, if possible, ensure all children are present to avoid building feelings of resentment. Separate discussions could be held with older children much later.
- If possible, you and your spouse should tell your children about the divorce together; as this would help to portray a team effort of your parenting. As much as possible, you and your spouse want to present as a united front, therefore you both have to be respectful of each other while giving honest explanations



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and avoiding blames (even if your spouse is not present). Reassure them of your love for them and address the possible changes to be experienced (bearing in mind not to overwhelm them with all the details). The amount of information you give will be dependent upon the ages of the children.

- Ensure that you reassure the children that they are not to blame. There is a tendency for young children to want to take responsibility for the separation, therefore as parents you have to be proactive and relieve them of the guilt, whether or not they vocalize it.
- Encourage them to ask questions, and answer them truthfully, while still avoiding going into full detail about the separation.
- Feel free to express sadness, while doing your best to avoid showing anger or resentment. This helps your children to understand that it's okay for them to express their sadness too.

### **How Can I be There for My Children?**

At this time, your children need all the love and support they can get to guarantee their security. To them, this may feel like they are experiencing loss (of a parent, of a family, or a familiar lifestyle). As a parent, it is your responsibility to provide support as they grieve. This could be achieved by:

Encouraging your children to share their feelings and listening attentively to what they have to say. Validate their feelings and reassure them of your unconditional love for them. For those who may find it difficult to describe their feelings, help them identify words to describe them. Be observant about their moods and encourage them to talk. Also, assure your children that they can be honest with you about their feelings.

Even after initially assuring your children that they are not to blame for the separation, sometimes, you will still need to reassure them of this. In order to be able to do this lovingly without getting worked up, you have to be patient and constantly reassuring them of their parent's unconditional love for them.

It is not enough to tell your children that you love them; your actions have to show it as well. Maintain physical contact such as hugs, kisses, gentle pats on the back, rubs on the back and so on. Even just being within the same vicinity helps them to feel the assurance of your love. Let your kids know that although the family unit's physical conditions have changed, they can still have warm and healthy relationships with both parents. Be consistent with pick up and drop off and guard against canceling plans with your children.

- Ensure that you try and maintain some form of structure, so as to further provide stability; having this structure will help them adjust to the changes better. Communicate with the other parent, so that there's some similarity between the structures in both homes; however, you do not have to be rigid about this. The idea behind this is being able to consistently communicate expectations to your children, so as to provide them with calmness and stability.
- Maintaining structure also involves adhering to previously set rules, rewards and discipline. There's a tendency for you as a parent at this time to want to spoil the children, but you have to resist it.

### **What About Me?**

We have been talking about ways of helping your children cope with divorce, but all these cannot be successfully achieved if you do not take care of yourself! The only way to be there for your children is to ensure that you take good care of yourself. The



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calmer and emotionally present you are, the more comfortable your children will be with the process. Here are a few steps that you could employ to ensure your wellness:

- Maintain a healthy diet and regular exercise schedule. Exercise helps to release built-up stress and frustrations that usually accompany divorce. It might be easier to buy fast food than to cook at this point, but cooking healthy will be more beneficial as it would make you feel better, both physically and emotionally.
- You could write down your thoughts and feelings in a journal. Doing this will allow you to get them out of your mind, thereby relieving you of sadness, anger or any other associated feeling. It also allows you the opportunity to track your success along the journey.
- Make intentional efforts to spend time with friends and/or family members; resist the temptation to just sit around and sulk. It is understandable to want to avoid them because you don't want to talk about the divorce, but spending time with them will help take your mind off it. They'll understand if you ask them to avoid talking about it.
- In as much as you want to avoid talking about the divorce with friends and family, there will be times when you will need to talk to them about your feelings. Doing this will help resist the temptation to want to vent to your children. Avoid talking to your children about your negative feelings, so you do not make them feel responsible for you. If you don't feel comfortable talking to friends and family about it, you could speak with a therapist or seek available support groups you could join. Joining such groups helps bring to your realization that you are not alone on this

journey and you can also learn from other's experiences.

- If you feel that you are experiencing intense negative emotions (anger, resentment, guilt, etc.), and you cannot manage them effectively, you may need to seek professional counseling services.

### **How Can I Work Effectively with My Ex?**

Ensuring that you and your ex work together as best as possible offers more stability and security to your children. In some cases, this might not be easy, as both parents may be battling with negative feelings towards each other. However, if the parents can get past their feelings and parent together effectively, it will be of tremendous benefit to the emotional and psychological well-being of the children. Below are a few tips that may be helpful in ensuring effective parenting with your ex:

- You and your ex must agree not to argue in front of your children. Witnessing arguments between parents is very damaging for children. Also, avoid putting your children in the middle of your fights and never make them feel that they have to take sides.
- Try developing a practicable parenting plan with your ex, so as to allow the children access to both parents and be sure to involve the other parent in school and other activities in the children's lives.
- Refrain from discussing the other parent's behavior with the children and avoid speaking negatively about him/her.
- Allow the children to have a loving and satisfying relationship with the other parent. There's a tendency to feel jealous, but you must resist the temptation to do anything to sabotage the relationship.



- Make it a conscious effort to maintain a cordial relationship with your ex, by interacting politely. This portrays a positive example to the children and teaches them the skill of problem-solving.

### **How do I Know when to Seek Professional Help for My Children?**

As earlier mentioned, every child's experience with divorce is peculiar; some children experience few problems and eventually adjust with time, some others have a very difficult time adjusting and the above stated strategies may not be effective. Distinguishing between the "normal" reactions and "extreme" reactions would be helpful in making a decision as to whether to seek help or not.

### **Normal Reactions to Divorce/Separation:**

- **Anger:** your children may be angry with you and your ex for tampering with their status quo and therefore may express rage and resentment towards you.
- **Fear/Anxiety:** it's normal for children to feel anxious and fearful about the changes and adjustments that they are faced with.
- **Mild Depression:** Loss automatically results in sadness; therefore it is expected that children will experience sadness as a result of the new development. In addition to sadness, there's a possibility of for them to develop a sense of hopelessness and this would result in mild depression.
- Parents need to understand that these emotional experiences are normal and will gradually be resolved with time as long as they are offered the love and support that they need. However, for some children, there's a possibility for things to get worse, so

parents need to pay close attention to their children's development and behaviours.

### **Signs of Extreme Reactions to Divorce/Separation:**

- Change in personality
- Acting younger than their chronological age
- Sleep or eating problems
- Acting out and repeatedly getting into trouble at school
- Drug or alcohol use
- Consistent outbursts of anger
- Self-injury
- Poor concentration
- Withdrawal from loved ones
- Fear of being apart from parent(s)
- Manipulation
- Refusal to engage in previously loved activities

The above listed behaviours are possible indications of your child being stuck in anger, anxiety and depression; therefore, it might be beneficial to seek professional help.