

- If you share custody, plan to spend some time with your children on a regular basis, preferably every day. Realize that divorce doesn't lessen parental responsibility and that your ex-spouse is a parent, too.
- Help children resume their normal lives as soon as possible.
- Tell your children's teachers and ask them to let you know about changes in behavior and work.
- Don't lean on children for emotional support. Adult friends, a counselor, or a support group can help you through this trying time. Children need to be children.
- Do not assume that all problems are a result of divorce.
- Be compassionate with your child, but also maintain your expectations for his behavior.
- Get professional help if a child's problems are severe, last longer than a year, or if your child wants an outside person to talk to.
- Be realistic about the adjustment time for all of the family members. It may take as long as two years before things get back to "normal."
- Accept sadness and feelings of missing the other parent. Allow your child to express these feelings without feeling guilty or ashamed.

Trying to be a good parent while coping with divorce is probably one of the hardest jobs a person could ever have. Parents need support, too. Some support systems for both divorced parents and children include: Parents Without Partners, mental health centers, churches, community centers, schools, youth organizations such as 4-H, and family service agencies. Do not be afraid to seek help.

Putting Knowledge to Work



When you have a question, call or visit your local office of The University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service.

You'll find a friendly, well-trained staff ready to help you with information, advice, and free publications covering agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H and youth development.

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GALE A. BUCHANAN, DEAN & DIRECTOR

TIPS FOR PARENTS

Divorce and Children



The University of Georgia

Cooperative Extension Service

College of Family and Consumer Sciences
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Divorce and Children

Divorce can be one of the most traumatic events in a person's life, not only for the partners involved, but also for their children. Children often go through severe emotional pain and stress during a divorce. How the parents handle the divorce and what happens to the family afterward have a lot to do with how well children adjust.

In general, children react in these ways:

- Shock, surprise, denial. ("This can't be happening to me.")
- Worry. ("What will happen to me?")
- Anger at parents.
- Feeling rejected.
- Feeling caught between parents.
- Believing that their parents will somehow get back together.
- Showing immaturity or extreme maturity.
- Guilt. ("Did I do something wrong?")

Children's age

The child's age at the time of the divorce has a lot to do with how he reacts. Most **preschoolers** still don't know what separation or divorce means. But they know their parents might be angry and upset, and that they live apart. They feel loss and sorrow and wonder what will happen to them. Preschoolers may even blame themselves. They think if they had behaved better, their parents would have stayed together.

They may also become very angry and attack the parent they think is to blame, or they may misbehave with friends. Or they may turn their anger inward and become depressed and withdrawn. As a parent, you can encourage your child to share questions, concerns, and



feelings about the divorce. Tell your child that the divorce isn't his fault and that his parents still love him.

Elementary school children are beginning to understand what divorce means. They believe that their parents don't love each other and know they won't be living together any longer. Children this age usually hope, however, that their parents will get back together. They may feel loss, abandonment, rejection, depression, and anger. Your child may have trouble sleeping and may show signs of physical illness. Let your children know that however they respond to the divorce is okay. Children need to know that all of their feelings are accepted.

Youngsters usually want to know if anyone else knows about the divorce and what they should tell their friends. Parents can prepare children by explaining how others may react

to the news. They should tell teachers and other important adults before the children have to. It may help teens, as well as younger children, to talk to others their age who have gone through divorce. Parents can support this and put them in touch with someone who understands.

Helping children with divorce:

BEFORE:

- Both parents (if possible) should tell the children about the separation before one parent leaves.
- Explain why you are getting a divorce. Telling the truth can help the children trust you. Do not give too much information at one time. Avoid blaming each other and reassure the children that they are not to blame.
- Be prepared to explain the divorce many times. Young children usually do not understand the idea at first.
- Explain how it will affect the children—where they will live, go to school, etc.
- Reassure the children that both parents love them and will always love them.
- Watch for a delayed reaction. Some children try to become "little adults" at first, but later their feelings may come to the surface.

AFTER:

- Set up a visiting schedule right away.
- Don't make too many changes right away, such as moving, changing schools, etc.
- Do not criticize the ex-spouse in front of the children.