



“DIVORCE & CHILDREN”

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Divorce happens. Its causes and timing are more complex than this brief article will cover. The focus here is simple. The focus is how to help children through divorce.

At nineteen years of age, Steve is a second year college student. His parents divorced when he was fourteen, five years ago. Now, having lived with the consequences of his parents' divorce, he says, “I never knew how much it affected me.” Steve adds that his parents handled their divorce pretty well.

Steve's experience is common. While many divorces seem to proceed smoothly, their impact on children seldom proceeds smoothly. For most children, the divorce of their parents separation and divorce confuses them and leaves them stressed and sad. These are the reactions with which parents and others should try to help. Let's look into them and see what we can do.

Children React to Divorce

While children do not react to their parents' divorce in a universally consistent manner, confusion, stress and sadness are common. Probably, the worst of these reactions is confusion. None of us handles unexplained losses or the threat of losses very well. Just imagine that the company for which you work and on which you depend for your income and financial survival disappears, no one alerted you to this possibility, and no one explains what happened.

With confusion and significant loss, children often invent their own ways of making sense of what happened. Some of their ways of making sense of what happened may be positive and productive, while others will be troubling. Given what children cannot explain, but somehow need to make sense of, one of their common responses, but not universal, is to blame someone. They may blame mom or dad for causing the divorce. They may become furiously

angry with their blaming. Sadly, they may blame themselves. As irrational as this may appear, it often makes sense. After all, because they have been the center of their parents' lives and have had influence on their parents, they must have influenced them to get a divorce.

Children's reactions frequently involve grief. They grieve, in response to their losses. Generally, grieving solicits support from others. Divorcing parents need to look carefully at this because they may not be the best source of support for their grieving children.

The variety of reactions to divorce is far more complicated than blaming and grieving. For example, a divorce may involve major financial changes and, possibly, hardships that come with these changes. So, instead of a deep dive into children's reactions to divorce, let's emphasize what parents—especially parents—or maybe others can do to help children through the divorce of their parents.

What Parents Can Do

Give children good information. A divorce is not merely about information. It involves major changes in the lives of everyone involved. Good information, though, is needed. So, as best you can, tell the truth about what you know and in ways that your children can understand. The idea is not so much that you need to share information, but that your child needs to receive good information. So, share information about living arrangements, school, or other likely events, without overwhelming them with all you know.

Be specific about events and planning. Your children have questions. They will make needed adjustments to changes far better with new details than without them. For example, "At the beginning of the month, mom will move to Papa and Nana's place." Or, "We have no plans to move from this house. If that changes, we will make sure you know." Or, "On ___(date)___, we will meet with a judge who will confirm that our divorce is final."

I love you. Repeat this message often. And, consider adding, "And I will do all I can to make sure you're okay."

Give them order. A divorce is often messy and unpredictable. A good way to help minimize the chaos is to schedule times with your children as times to talk about how things are going and the things that will be happening. Making appointments with your children may seem odd. However, it gives them a small measure of predictability, in the midst of chaos, and allows them to focus their attention on important events at selected times, instead of worrying so much about them all of the time.

Say the same thing, insofar as possible. Obviously, a divorce usually indicates that those who are divorcing have serious disagreements. The impact of these disagreement on children can and should be minimized, as parents agree about what they say to their children.

Show respect and support of your spouse. As difficult as this may be for parents, they should respect and support their children, by affirming the importance of mom or dad in their

lives. After all, they have only one mom and one dad. When one or both of them are devalued, children are devalued, too. Along with respect and support, divorcing parents should avoid blaming their respective partners in conversation with their children.

Listen carefully. Sure, children need to share their distressing thoughts and feelings, but in doing this, they also need to believe that they are being heard. Receive their sadness, frustration, or worry as a special gift, their way of connecting with you. As difficult as their sharing may be for you, encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings and welcome their honesty about difficult things, including their negative thoughts about you.

Let your children care about you. Despite having difficult thoughts and feelings about you, you are still their parent. They care about you. During a divorce, though, they may not know how to do this. So, help them to find ways to care about you, even if your larger concern is how you care about them.

Acknowledge growth and change. Usually, growth is a positive thing. However, as your children develop from, say, being fourteen years of age to seventeen years of age, their questions will change. While you may have settled almost all of what you need to settle, with regard to the divorce, your children may not have done so. Therefore, as they continue to develop, remind yourself that their growth may pose new challenges for you. Welcome them.

Demonstrate patience. Be patient with yourself. The distress of coping with your divorce is not a permanent condition. No matter how strongly you feel about it, the intensity of your feelings will decline. When you relate with your children, keep this in mind. The intensity of their feelings will decline, too. Usually, very little is settled “today.” Many divorcing parents believe that there is value in acknowledging that “we may not be okay today, but we will get there.” Or, “I know it hurts. We may hurt for a while, but we will hurt together. And, after a while, our hurt will go away.”

Take care of yourself. While the idea of taking care of yourself may appear to be selfish, it is just the opposite. By taking care of yourself, you provide a model of self-care for your children and communicate the expectation that both of you will be okay. Also, show discipline in what you eat and drink. This, too, will provide a good example for your children.

Expect problems to find you. Your parenting may be effective so that your children do not require much more of you than you have usually given. However, some common problems arise, regardless of the quality of your parenting. When they appear, give serious attention to them. When problems do not receive appropriate attention, they often get worse. So, if you see some of the following problems in your children, give your attention to them and seek help, when you determine that it is needed: Decline in school performance. Drug or alcohol use. Disturbed sleep. Prolonged depressed mood. Excessive and out-of-context anger. Decline of interest in loved activities. Withdrawal from loved ones and friends. Skewed, distorted and poor concentration. One or more of these may be signs that your child needs more than you can provide.

Physical reassurance. Whether your child is twelve or twenty, one of the most reassuring gestures is a hug. No words are needed, except, maybe, “I love you.”

Remember to laugh. A divorce is not a laughing matter. However, many memories of funny events with your children are worth re-telling and enjoying. Also, your children can likely give you information about DVDs, television programs, or other sources of humorous entertainment. Enjoy yourself being with your children and taking advantage of opportunities to laugh.

Seek professional help. Seeking a divorce does not require counseling. Still, you know when you are not managing yourself very well. And, you may see this in your children, too. If this is your situation, seek consultation with a professional mental health care provider. It is far better to seek consultation and determine that you don’t need it than to avoid getting help when you need it.

Life-long Parenting

Divorcing is temporary. Parenting goes on, long after a divorce. With this in mind, some additional thoughts may help you to help your children to thrive, following a divorce.

Your children need you. Your divorce does not change this fact. Instead, because of this fact, you can invent numerous ways to meet their needs, adding to what has already been suggested. Conversation is always good. Attending your children’s events, such as baseball games, or attending events, such as movies, with them helps, too. Then, there are phone calls, greeting cards, and text messaging. Use your imagination and find ways to confirm that your children are important and important to you. They need this.

Practice generosity and kindness. Too often, a divorce does not prompt generous and kind thoughts. However, these are the kinds of thoughts that you want your children to have. They are much more likely to have them because you have them and demonstrate them. The importance of this has been recognized for centuries. The idea is to treat others as you wish to be treated. This is a profoundly life-affirming way to treat your children and yourself. It is a way to help them to live effectively.

Children and Divorce: Resources for Parents and Children

A note about resources: Numerous factors shape the complex needs for helping children through the divorce of their parents. A small number of resources is listed here. However, a trained mental health care professional whose expertise is helping children will very likely have recommendations of books, DVDs, pamphlets, people, and other resources. The important thing is that, no matter what your child’s needs look like, help for them is available.

American Academy of Pediatrics
Helping Children and Families Deal With Divorce and Separation

<https://publications.aap.org/>

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies
Helping Children Cope With Divorce
<https://www.abct.org/fact->

American Psychological Association
Healthy Divorce: How to make your split as smooth as possible
<https://www.apa.org/topics/>

The Cleveland Clinic
How to Help Your Child After a Breakup or Divorce
<https://health.clevelandclinic.org>

Yale University Medicine
Helping Children Cope with Divorce
<https://www.yalemedicine.org/>