

CHILDREN AND DIVORCE:

Helping kids after a breakup

Divorce is between adults — but the breakup of a marriage can have profound effects on children, too. Here's help presenting a united front to your child.

Divorce is stressful for the entire family. Your child might feel as if his or her world has turned upside down. But there's good news. You can ease your child's adjustment to the divorce by choosing to interact responsibly with your spouse. Consider these practical tips for children and divorce.

HOW TO BREAK THE NEWS

It's best if you and your spouse can tell your child about the divorce together. Speak honestly and simply, and skip the ugly details. You might say, "Your mom (or dad) and I have been having trouble getting along, so we think it's best for us to live apart."

Make sure your child understands that divorce is only between adults. Remind your child — repeatedly if necessary — that he or she did nothing to cause the divorce and that both of you love your child as much as ever.

Also tell your child's teacher and school counselor or social worker about the divorce. They can observe your child and keep you updated on any concerns.

EXPECT A MIX OF REACTIONS

Initially, your child might be most interested in concrete things. Where will I live? Do I need to change schools? Who will take me to swimming lessons? As you work out the terms of the divorce, try to maintain your child's routine as much as possible — or be quick to establish a new routine. Knowing what to expect will help your child feel more secure.

But soon, the reality of divorce will settle in. A younger child might respond to the stress by regressing to behavior he or she had previously outgrown, such as sucking on a pacifier or wetting the bed. A resurgence of separation anxiety could strike as well. Help your child put his or her feelings into words.

An older child might respond to the stress with a mix of emotions — anger, anxiety, grief or even relief. If your child's anger turns inward, he or she might become depressed or withdrawn. Anger can have the opposite effect, too, causing a child to act out or develop behavior issues. Encourage your child to share his or her feelings as openly as possible.

KEEP YOUR CHILD OUT OF THE FIGHT

Respecting your child's relationship with the other parent can help your child adapt to the divorce. Keep these general "don'ts" in mind:

- Don't speak badly about your spouse in front of your child.
- Don't make accusations against your spouse in front of your child.
- Don't force your child to choose sides.
- Don't use your child as a messenger or go-between.
- Don't argue or discuss child support issues in front of your child.
- Don't pump your child for information about the other parent.
- Don't use your child as a pawn to hurt the other parent.

DON'T BEND THE RULES

It might be tempting to relax your parental rules while your child grieves the divorce, but this could lead to even more insecurity. Children thrive on consistency, structure and routine — even if they insist on testing the boundaries and limits. If your child shares time between two households, it's important to maintain similar rules in both homes.

COUNSELING CAN HELP

You might feel so hurt or overwhelmed by your divorce that you turn to your child for comfort and direction, but that's not your child's role. For help sorting through your feelings, consider joining a divorce support group or seeking counseling through a social service agency or mental health center. If you and your spouse need help reaching decisions about your child during or after the divorce, consider using the services of a family or divorce mediator.

Your child might also benefit from counseling, especially if he or she has significant behavioral issues, seems depressed or has trouble adjusting to the divorce after the first year.

PUT YOUR CHILD FIRST

During a divorce, interacting with your spouse might be the last thing you want to do — but it's important. Your child needs both of you. Work out custody arrangements and other details with your child's best interests in mind. This could mean putting your child's needs ahead of your own wishes or desires. Also, remember that a bitter or prolonged custody battle could take a serious, long-term toll on your child's mental health. Instead, help your child maintain a strong, loving relationship with the other parent as you work toward meeting common parenting goals. For your child, support from both parents may be the best tool for weathering the challenges of divorce.