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## Divorce and Children

Every year, more than one million children in the United States experience the divorce of their parents. The average divorce takes place within the first 7 years of marriage, so many of these children are under the age of 6. For many children, divorce can be as difficult as the death of a parent. The entire family is faced with the challenge of adjusting to a new way of life. When this happens, children need the guidance, patience, and love of both parents to help them through.

### Put Your Child First

The most important factor in how divorce affects a child's life, is how parents treat each other and their children during and after the divorce. Keep in mind, divorce is a major event in your child's life, one that she has no control over. Parents must work together to make the changes as easy as possible for everyone. Even as the marriage ends, your role as a parent continues. In fact, it becomes more important than ever. Set aside your differences with your child's other parent and put your child first, by following these suggestions:

- Never force your child to take sides. Every child will have loyalties to both parents.
- Do not involve your child in arguments between the two of you.
- Do not criticize each other in front of your child or when your child might be listening to a conversation you are having with someone else. Even if you find out the other parent is saying bad things about you, explain to your child that when people get angry, they sometimes say things that are hurtful.
- Discuss your concerns and feelings with your child's other parent when and where your child cannot hear.
- Avoid fighting in front of your child.

### Making It Easier

As a parent, there are many things you can do to help your child adjust to the changes in your family, including the following:

**Talk with your child early and often** This is a very important way for you to help your child through difficult times. Being able to share his fears, worries, and feelings with you can make your child feel safe and special. The earlier you tell him what is happening and the more often you talk, the more comfortable he will feel. When talking with your child about the divorce, follow these guidelines:

**Be completely honest and open about the circumstances.** Talk about the divorce in simple terms. For example, "Your dad and I are having some trouble getting along" or "Your mother and I are thinking we may need to separate."

**Make sure your child knows he is not responsible.** Children will often think it is their fault that one parent has left. They may blame themselves or feel alone, unwanted, or unloved. Let your child know the changes are not his fault, that you love him and will not leave him. Try not to blame your ex-spouse or show your anger. Explain that parents sometimes make adult decisions to live separately.

**Be patient with questions.** You do not have to have all the answers. Sometimes just carefully listening to your child's concerns is more helpful than talking. Following are questions you might expect from your child:

- Why are you getting divorced?
- Will you ever get back together again?
- Where am I going to live?
- Will we move?
- Will I have to change schools?
- Was the divorce my fault?
- How often will I see Daddy/Mommy?
- Are we going to be poor?

Give your child the reassurance he needs to feel safe and loved. If needed, don't hesitate to get help from your pediatrician or a family counselor.

**Allow Your Child To Be A Child** Resist using your child as a replacement for your ex-spouse. Avoid pressuring children with statements like, "You are the man in the family now" or "Now I have to depend on you." Children have a right to enjoy childhood and grow up at a normal pace. As they grow older, they will be able to take on more responsibility and help around the house. Don't expect too much too soon.

**Respect The Relationship Between Your Child And The Other Parent** Allow your children to spend time with their other parent without making them feel guilty or disloyal to you. When a parent leaves, many children are afraid the other one may leave too. Reassure your children that you both still love them even though they may only be living with one parent at a time. It is important to let your children show their love to both parents. Unless your ex-spouse is unfit to parent, try not to let your differences keep your children away from him or her. Remember, one of the most important ways to help your children cope with a separation or divorce is to help them maintain a strong, loving relationship with both parents.

**Keep Your Child's Daily Routine Simple And Predictable** Many divorced parents feel guilty that the divorce has upset their children. They find it hard to discipline the children when they need it. Making rules, setting a good example, and providing emotional support can be difficult. Giving in to your child's demands will not help. Anger or difficult behavior may be part of your child's attempts to cope with the divorce. Set sensible limits. Schedule meals, chores, and bedtime at regular times so that your child knows what to expect each day. Parents living separately should agree on a set of consistent rules for both households. It is also very important to live up to your promises to visit or spend time with your child. A routine weekly or monthly schedule may be comforting to your child.

**Use Help From The Outside** Children often turn to neighbors, grandparents, and peers for comfort and attention. These relationships can offer support and stability to children as well

as needed relief to a parent. Teachers or school social workers that are aware of the divorce and understand the child's problems may also be able to give a helping hand.

For parents too, the changes are not easy. Many adults going through a divorce experience depression. If you are suffering from anxiety or depression as a result of a divorce or separation, don't be afraid to see a counselor. It is important for parents to be healthy so they can be available to their children during this difficult time. Social agencies, mental health centers, women's centers, and support groups for divorced or single parents are helpful. There are also many informative books and articles about divorce for both parents and children (see "For More Information"). Your pediatrician is very aware of the effects that separation and divorce may have on emotions and behavior. He or she can help you find ways to cope with the stress you and your children are feeling.

**Adjusting To A New Life** Children have great strength and the ability to bounce back from rough times. After a divorce, children may even develop much closer relationships with each parent. In time, most children learn to accept the changes brought on by divorce. The challenge becomes much easier though, when both parents provide the understanding, support, and love that all children need from their mothers and fathers, even after they separate.

## How Children React To Divorce

Reactions to a divorce can vary depending on your child's age, sex, temperament, past experiences, and family support. The following are normal ways that your child may react to a separation or divorce. If any of these behaviors become excessive, talk to your pediatrician.

### Children under 3 years of age may:

- Be sad
- Be afraid of others
- Not want to be separated from one parent
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Have trouble with toilet training
- Have outbursts or tantrums
- Blame themselves for the divorce - especially children between 3 and 5 years of age.

### School-age children may:

- Be moody or angry
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Seem distracted and faraway
- Not do as well in school
- Have tantrums
- Be more aggressive or angry
- Express their sadness and wish for parents to get back together
- Worry about divided loyalty to their parents

### Adolescents may:

- Withdraw emotionally from family and/or friends
- Become aggressive or angry
- Engage in risky behaviors such as sexual experimentation or use of drugs

- Worry about the financial effects of divorce on the family
- Have problems eating or sleeping
- Feel depressed

## A Word About Custody

Custody arrangements can be one of the most difficult issues in a divorce. Today, parents are able to work out a wide variety of custody and visitation arrangements. Physical custody defines where the child lives and can be split between both parents. Even if physical custody remains with one parent, the other parent can share legal custody. Legal custody allows a parent to share in key decisions such as a child's schooling, medical treatment, and religion.

Although mothers are still more likely to maintain custody of the child, more and more fathers are now taking on this role. While there is no evidence that one form of custody is better than another, all children need a stable place where they feel secure.

Even more important than custody is that both parents remain as involved as possible. Ideally, both parents should play a role in the child's life by helping with homework, attending athletic or other after-school events, and contributing emotional and financial support. The parents should work together to arrange a flexible schedule for visits. Neither parent should be prevented from taking part in raising the child. Make sure your child knows that it is OK to love both parents.

If you are having custody disagreements, consider calling a mediator to help settle disagreements. Mediators can be found by contacting a lawyer or family court.

## Child Support

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, millions of female-headed households do not receive child support. In some cases, one parent does not want money from the other parent. In others, the parent may not be able or willing to pay or perhaps cannot even be found. Many times, the parent with custody simply does not enforce the child support agreement.

The financial burden of raising a child should not fall on one parent alone. Both parents have a financial obligation to their child. However, even when child support is paid, money issues may still be a problem between parents. Remember, if either parent uses money as a weapon, it is the child who is caught in the cross fire.

Contact your state's child support enforcement agency for guidelines on what parents must pay for child support. If your child's other parent will not cooperate, your state or local government may take action to force payment. State agencies can also help if your child's other parent has suddenly moved and you do not know where he or she is living. In most cases, it is often helpful to talk with an attorney.

**For more information, contact:** Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support Enforcement 370 L'Enfant Promenade, SW Washington, DC 20447 202/401-9373 Web site: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cse/index.html>

There are many excellent books available on coping with divorce for both you and your children. Here are just a few to look for at your local library or bookstore. Please note: These materials have not been reviewed by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

**Preschoolers:**

- The Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (Little Brown & Co, 1988)
- It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear by Vicki Lansky (Book Peddlers, 1998)

**School-age kids:**

- The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce by Richard Gardner (Bantam, 1970)
- How It Feels When Parents Divorce by Jill Kremetz (Knopf, 1988)
- Why Are We Getting a Divorce? by Peter Mayle (Crown Publishers, 1988)

**Parents:**

- Caring for Your Baby & Young Child: Birth to Age 5 from the American Academy of Pediatrics (Bantam, 1998)
- Caring for Your School Age Child: Ages 5-12 from the American Academy of Pediatrics (Bantam, 1995)
- Caring for Your Adolescent: Ages 12-21 from the American Academy of Pediatrics (Bantam, 1991)
- Vicki Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents by Vicki Lansky (Book Peddlers, 1996)

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care & advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment your pediatrician may recommend.

*This brochure was written by the American Academy of Pediatrics Copyright 1974, Updated 3/99*

**Helping Children Cope: 20 Tips For Divorced Parents (Contemporary Pediatrics)**

- Emphasize that the divorce is entirely your decision.
- Explain that the divorce is not the child's fault.
- Mention, if true, that every effort was made to preserve the marriage.
- Point out that the decision is irreversible.
- Be open to the child's inevitable questions: if the child doesn't ask questions, do not assume "all is okay."
- Be prepared to offer repeated explanations to children's questions in the following months.
- Reassure the child that his needs will be met.
- Explain where he will live & go to school, where the other parent will live, and when they will see each other.
- Try to avoid moving the child.
- Reassure the child that both parents love and (if true) will continue a close relationship with the child.
- If the father is no longer to be involved, arrange for a relative or friend to act as a father substitute.
- Try to spend individual time with each child.
- Avoid using the child as a pawn, messenger, or spy.
- Do not force the child to take sides.
- Remember birthdays and holidays.
- Attend special activities in which the child is a participant.
- Keep promises.
- Respect generational boundaries.

- Maintain discipline.
- Develop skills in conflict resolution (avoid needless provocations or name-calling, hear the child out, work toward mutually satisfactory solutions).

This information should not be used as substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's physician. Health related topics found on the Andorra Pediatrics web site should not be used for diagnosing purposes or be substituted for medical advice. As with any new or ongoing treatment, always consult your professional healthcare provider before making any changes in treatment or beginning any new treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, please call our office.