

Information from**Human****Environmental****Sciences****Extension****FAMILY RELATIONS**

Activities for Helping Children Deal with Divorce

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Going through the process of divorce is a challenging life transition for both parents and children. During their parents' divorce, children often feel a wide variety of conflicting emotions. It is very important for parents to provide their children with understanding and support. This guide provides ideas for many activities parents can do to support their children and help them work through their feelings, concerns and frustrations regarding the divorce.

Drawing pictures

Anger, sadness, worry, relief, confusion, guilt, embarrassment, loneliness, nervousness — these are all common emotions that children experience when their parents divorce. Many children have difficulty expressing these emotions in words. Drawing pictures of feelings can be an easier way for children to express how they truly feel inside. This process helps children express themselves in a positive manner and aids parents in knowing what their children are thinking and feeling concerning the divorce. After your child has drawn a picture, ask specific ques-

tions about the drawing. Encourage him or her to explain what he or she has drawn and why. Be positive and supportive.

Things to draw pictures of:

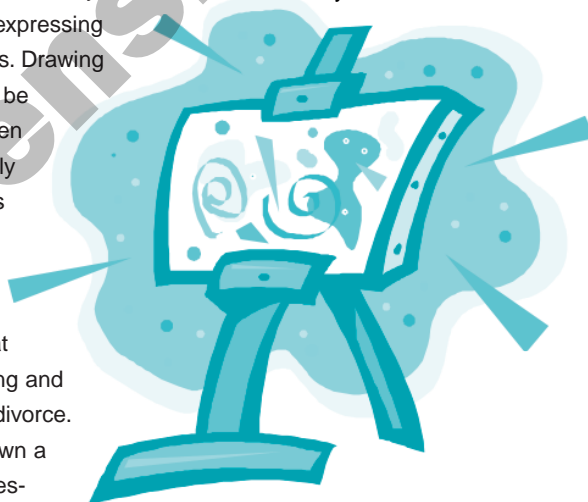
- What does divorce look like?
- How does divorce make you feel?
- Draw pictures of various feelings, such as anger, sadness or loneliness.
- Draw a picture of your family, including anyone you feel is part of your family. Write each person's name by his or her picture.
- Draw a picture of the homes you live in.
- If a genie could grant you one wish related to your family, what would you wish for? Draw a picture of your wish.

Conversation starters

Following divorce, it is important for parents and children to keep the lines of communication open. Often, children have many fears, worries and questions about the divorce. If they feel comfortable talking with their parents about these issues, they will likely have an easier adjustment to the changes divorce brings. However, children may not always know how to express their feelings or put their questions into words. Discuss the following questions with your children to help them talk through their feelings about the divorce. Good conversations can occur in a wide variety of settings: during dinner, in the car, at bedtime or on walks.

Possible questions:

- How has your life changed since the divorce?
- Why do you think people get married?
- Why do you think people get divorced?
- What is a happy family like?
- Who do you talk with about the divorce?
- What good has come from the divorce?
- What do you worry about?
- What do you think your life will be



Letter writing

Writing letters is a constructive way to deal with confusing feelings and to blow off steam. Encourage your child to write a letter to one or both parents, expressing her feelings about the divorce. Tell her she can write whatever she feels like. Assure her that she does not have to send the letters if she does not want to. The act of putting feelings and ideas in writing often helps to put the situation in perspective.

like in five years?

- What good qualities does your dad have? Your mom?
- If you could change anything about your life, what would you make different?



Communicating from a distance

When one parent moves a considerable distance away, coping with the divorce often becomes more difficult for children because, in addition to the effects of the divorce, they must also adjust to not seeing that parent very often. The following tips can help parents and children maintain strong relationships from long distances.

- E-mail each other. E-mail is a fast, convenient way to keep in touch.
- Start a postcard club. Everyone likes to receive mail! It only takes a few minutes to fill out a postcard. Give some stamped cards to your child, and take turns sending a card each week.
- Have weekly or monthly phone dates. Set a specific time when you will talk on the phone (e.g. Wednesday evenings at 7 p.m. or the first Sunday of each month at noon).

This will give both of you something to look forward to!

- Create a shared journal. Buy an inexpensive notebook and write your thoughts and feelings in it. Exchange the notebook when you see each other.
- Create a family Web site. This is a great way to post information and pictures to each other.
- Make audio or video tape recordings. Hearing or seeing each other, whether for special occasions or just during daily activities, will keep the bond between you strong!

See MU Extension guide GH 6123, *Communicating Effectively with Chil-*

dren, for more information about family communication.

The power of stories

Reading children's books

Many children's books address the topic of divorce. Reading such books with your child can be a valuable way to help him work through the feelings and concerns he is facing regarding the divorce in his own life. Children often identify with characters in books. Discussing how characters work through their challenges can give your child insight into his own situation. For a list of recommended books, refer to MU Extension guide GH 6600, *Helping Children Understand Divorce*.

Writing stories

Many children write and illustrate stories. If your child enjoys this kind of activity, suggest that he write a story about divorce. Encourage your child to be as creative as possible and to draw pictures that help illustrate the story. If your child is willing, have him share his story with you. Be sure to be positive and supportive of his work.

Parent information cards

Make information cards for you, your child and the other parent. Write information about yourself on one side of a large index card, and put information about your child's other parent on the other side. With this card, you, your child and your child's other parent will always know how to contact each other.

Items to include:

- ✓ Name
- ✓ Addresses (home and work)
- ✓ Phone numbers (home and work)
- ✓ Days I live with this parent
- ✓ Things we like to do together

Play together

As with drawing pictures, play is often a good way to help children express their feelings when it is difficult to talk about them. The following are some ideas of effective play activities:

■ Make puppets.

Create finger puppets or puppets out of brown paper sacks. Have the puppets talk about their feelings.

■ Play games.

Sometimes when people are occupied in another activity, it is easier to talk about feelings than if they just sit down to have a talk. There are even some games on the market that specifically address divorce.

■ Role play.

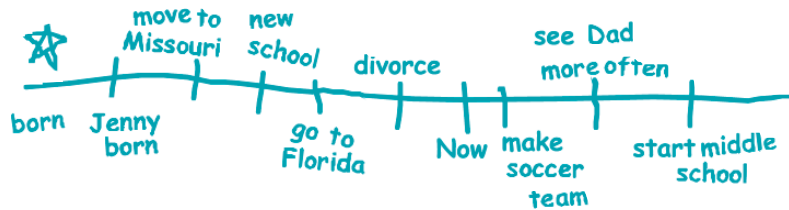
Practice dealing with difficult situations that come about during divorce by acting out scenarios and discussing ways these situations can be handled positively.

Personal history time line

One common feeling children experience after the divorce is worry about the future. They may be concerned

Directions for a personal history time line

- Draw a long horizontal line on a sheet of paper.
- Label your birth at one end with a star (★).
- Label the present time somewhere in the middle.
- Mark significant events that have occurred in your life between the "birth" star and the "present" mark. Possible ideas include births of siblings, getting pets, starting school, moving, learning to read, learning to ride a bike, divorce, remarriage, joining a team or club, death of relatives and special holidays and vacations.
- Mark events that you hope will happen in the future.



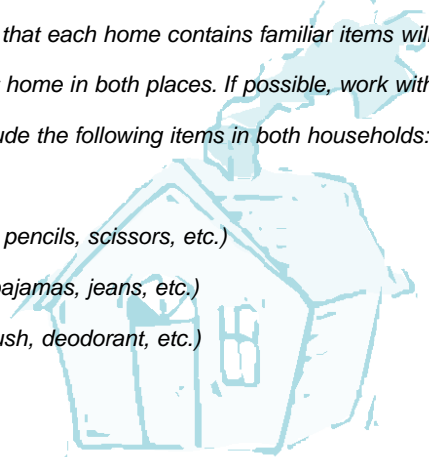
about what is going to happen to them and if their lives will ever be normal again. Creating a time line can help children put the current events of their lives in perspective. It can help them see that they have experienced many good things in the past, and that they have many years ahead of them to have fun and happy times with their families. Younger children will need help

with this activity but will enjoy thinking of events for their parent to put on their time line. Discuss your child's time line with him when he is finished. Point out that he has experienced many different events throughout life, some good and some bad. Help him to understand that he can get through the difficult time of divorce and that there are happiness and good times ahead.

Creating two comfortable homes

Your child should feel comfortable both in your home and in the home of your former spouse. Making sure that each home contains familiar items will help your child feel secure and at home in both places. If possible, work with your child's other parent and include the following items in both households:

- ✓ Favorite toys and games
- ✓ Basic school supplies (paper, pencils, scissors, etc.)
- ✓ Clothing (underwear, socks, pajamas, jeans, etc.)
- ✓ Toiletries (toothbrush, hair brush, deodorant, etc.)
- ✓ Favorite foods
- ✓ Photos of all family members



Let's exercise!!

Engaging in physical activities together helps parents and children spend time with one another and reap the health benefits of exercise!

Exercising is a good way to get rid of tension or angry feelings in a positive way.

Good activities for parents and children to enjoy together:

- swimming
- biking
- hiking
- walking
- camping
- flying kites
- roller blading

Refer to MU Extension guide

Time capsule

Making a time capsule is another way of helping children recognize that the troublesome feelings surrounding the divorce won't last forever and that there are many things to look forward to in the future. Have your child put things in the capsule that represent his life: stories, drawings, photographs, and other special treasures and reminders. Encourage your child to answer the following questions and include them in the time capsule:

Time capsule questions

- Who are your friends?
- Who is part of your family now?
- Who will be part of your family in the future?
- Where will you be living in one year? Five years?
- What kinds of things do you like to do?
- What would you like to learn how to do in the future?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?

There are many different kinds of containers that make good time capsules — large glass jars with tight lids, large manila envelopes, shoe boxes, or drawstring bags. After your child has finished making the time capsule, help her seal it. Let her decide when she will open it. For example, it might be opened in one year, on a certain birthday, or five years from the divorce. When the time comes to open the capsule, your child will undoubtedly have fun looking at the things she put in it, noticing how her handwriting has changed, and reading the things she wrote.

GH 1800, *Children's Activity Pyramid*, for many more examples of physical activities that parents and children can enjoy together.

Conclusion

Divorce is a difficult adjustment for

children and parents. All family members must deal with a wide variety of emotions and make changes in the way they live. However, despite their own struggles in the divorce process, parents still have an obligation to provide their children with love, nurturing and a

sense of stability. Relationship-building activities, such as those discussed in this guide, can help parents connect with their children and better understand their children's feelings and concerns. With time, patience and creativity, children and parents can successfully work through the effects of divorce together.

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