

Helping Preschoolers and Elementary-Age Children Adjust to Divorce

Divorce is a stressful process not just for parents, but also for preschoolers and school-age children. Between ages 3 and 10, children experience changes in their physical, emotional, mental and social development. These changes are greatly influenced by environmental factors, such as divorce. Children often feel powerless when faced with their parents' divorce, but younger children tend to react differently than older children.

Preschool- and elementary-age children might also be involved in athletics, scouts, recitals, after-school programs and other extracurricular activities. Parents tend to be their coaches, troop leaders and school board members and help with transportation and fundraising for these events. Research shows that when parenting plans change over time to meet each family member's needs and schedules, children and parents tend to adjust better to divorce. Children usually adjust better to divorce when their parents work together to ease the adjustment process.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

At this age, a preschooler's desire for independence grows, but they still rely on their parents to meet physical and emotional needs. Preschoolers typically respond to divorce with fear, confusion and guilt because they do not understand it. The child might feel abandoned once a parent moves out, or that they might never see that parent again. Witnessing conflict between parents is already stressful for children but worse if a child hears their name brought up in the conversation. Preschoolers think egocentrically, or that only their thoughts and views of the world matter, so they might blame themselves for the divorce. Children often think their bad behaviors are responsible for their parents' separation.

FOCUS on Kids

This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children. We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.

Children of this age tend to feel a sense of loss and grief without both parents around. They also feel uneasy and worried when separating from either parent. Preschoolers with divorced parents also commonly experience anger, withdrawal or depression because of their family's situation.

Furthermore, children of divorce commonly resort to behaviors that are inappropriate for their age. For example, they might grow reattached to a baby blanket and have problems using the toilet. Many children disobey rules or cling to parents and caregivers more than usual. Such misbehavior is how children of this age deal with divorce and separation because coping is a difficult and they just want to know their needs will be met. They learn that acting out reminds their parents to take care of them.

Elementary school-age children (ages 6 to 8)

At this age, children experience more change than during their preschool years. They have longer school days, larger friend groups and greater involvement in extracurricular activities, and their parents have a more direct effect on their development. The effects of these changes are magnified when there is a divorce in the family.

School-age children commonly experience sorrow and a sense of loss when one parent moves out and might cry because they miss the absent parent. Children often have fantasies about parents getting back together because they relieve separation anxiety. Children might also express anger and aggressive behavior toward one or both parents because they blame them for the divorce. Young children might learn these behaviors by watching their parents react with anger and aggression during arguments.

Parents who move out might have less frequent contact with their child. Young children can misinterpret a parent's absence as that parent not loving them anymore, and they might feel they have to comfort their parents while bottling up their own feelings. Children often feel obligated to physically and emotionally choose between parents. These thoughts and behaviors are inappropriate for children and can harm their emotional well-being over time.

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Older elementary-age children (ages 9 to 10)

Children at this age have more schoolwork, larger friend networks, more extracurricular activities and parental involvement but do not always respond to divorce in the same way as younger children. Older children have a greater capacity for understanding others' perspectives and beliefs. At this age, many children can understand the reasons for their parents' divorce and might try to learn ways to cope with this change.

Older elementary-age children are often sensitive to at least one parent's sadness, anger or frustration. They might feel they have to choose sides and hide their own feelings to make one parent feel better because they worry about being abandoned. These reactions are unhealthy and can impair a child's relationship and contact with the other parent.

Like young children, older children might attempt to fix their parents' broken relationship. Older children are aware they lack control over the divorce or separation, which might make them angry with themselves or others. They might also complain about headaches or stomach aches, which often stem from stress.

Furthermore, these children might struggle to develop and maintain positive peer relationships. Children of divorce might exhibit withdrawn, depressed or aggressive behaviors, which can make maintaining friend networks difficult. They might feel lonely and rejected by their peers, so their only friends might be other children who also feel rejected and have their own social and emotional problems. Therefore, older school children of divorce are more susceptible to low academic performance, substance abuse and other risky behaviors.

Communication for divorced parents

Communication is an important part of any successful co-parenting relationship. Some co-parents speak on a daily basis, whereas others have less frequent contact. In any case, effective co-parenting requires cooperative and regular communication between parents, so parents must agree on a plan that works for them.

Co-parents should communicate in a way that reduces conflict between them and minimizes stress for their children. Effective communication between co-parents can help children adjust and maintain strong relationships with their parents. These tips are meant for co-parents to help their children adjust to divorce:

- Use ex-etiquette when communicating with your co-parent. Discuss co-parenting details in a calm, friendly and pleasant manner. Listen patiently when the other parent is speaking. Demonstrate your understanding and respect for their opinions and suggestions.
- Avoid using your child as leverage or using threats or bargaining in an argument with the other parent. Approach each situation calmly and clearly, rather than defensively.

- Argue in a constructive manner and focus on trying to reduce tension during arguments. Release anger, frustration and other emotions in a healthy, gradual way. Use "I" messages, such as "I feel worried when you don't contact me to confirm you are picking up the children." Avoid name-calling and blaming the other parent.
- Be mindful of what you say when children are within earshot. Ensure children do not hear any language inappropriate for their age, such as curse words. Avoid putting them in the middle of co-parenting arguments and discussions.
- Resolve conflict, whether that requires parents to apologize or work out issues to settle any disputes. Do this in front of children so they can observe how to resolve conflicts.
- Exchange information pertaining to the children and include the other parent in all decisions that affect the children, such as school choice, extracurricular activities, camps and health care. Keep both parents involved in their children's life by exchanging report cards, drawings, photos and other items. Coordinate schedules and agree upon pickup and drop-off times for transitions, events and activities.
- Keep the topic on co-parenting. Avoid arguing about the other parent's tone of voice or what they have previously said or done in the past. Express appreciation for their contributions to parenting decisions and taking an interest in the child's life.
- Maintain a positive attitude. A successful co-parenting relationship requires cooperation, trust and a positive outlook.

Signs of distress in children

Common signs of stress include the following:

- Increasingly aggressive behavior
- Inability to sustain attention
- Lower grades and disruptive behavior at school
- Fantasies about parents getting back together
- Feelings of discouragement or loss of interest in favorite activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns, such as distaste for favorite foods, difficulty getting to sleep and staying asleep, and experiencing nightmares or fear of monsters
- Unstable emotions, such as becoming easily upset or being sad or angry then anxious or fearful a moment later
- Age-inappropriate behavior, such as thumb-sucking, temper tantrums or returning to an infantile security blanket
- Physical complaints of illness, such as stomach aches, headaches and fatigue.

Every child is different in how they cope with divorce, but parents should be aware of any signs of distress in their child. Sometimes children just need the support of both parents, but if problem behaviors persist over long periods

of time, parents might want to seek additional help. School guidance counselors or other mental health professionals might be able to help children deal with their parents' divorce.

Promote positive adjustment

Preschoolers and school-age children might not completely understand the coping process. In particular, younger children tend to rely on their parents to help them deal with stress. With their parents' support, children can develop a more confident, positive attitude. Co-parents can take steps to help preschoolers and elementary-age children adjust to divorce.

Establish rules for a structured household. Young children function better under a consistent routine in a safe and organized setting. Children should understand consequences for breaking rules.

Rules are important for maintaining routines, but you should still be flexible with change. Children's lives get busier as they get older. They have games, recitals or other demands on their time that can overlap with other appointments. Co-parents should work together to adapt to any schedule changes.

Set up play dates with other children of a similar age. Spending time with peers helps children develop social skills and helps them feel safe and content while separated from their parents.

Give children some time alone with toys and activities. Research shows children of divorce and separation adjust better when they have some playtime to themselves. It might be helpful to have duplicate toys, activities and photos of the other parent in both homes. Parents can also bring toys for the child while traveling.

Support them in doing things they enjoy. When parents take an interest in their child's hobbies, they demonstrate their care and concern for their child's well-being. Showing interest in your child's interests shows them their emotional needs will be met.

Encourage children to express their feelings. Research shows it is better for children to express their thoughts and feelings rather than bottle them up. For instance, they can draw or paint a picture, talk about or write down their thoughts and emotions.

Be supportive of children's relationships with the other parent. Children of divorce need enough time with both parents to build a meaningful bond. Children should also know it is good to maintain a relationship with the other parent.

Remind children the divorce is final and it is not their fault. Parents might first want to calmly and clearly explain to their children why they are getting a divorce. For example, you might say, "Mommy and Daddy are getting a divorce because we do not love each other in the same way anymore. This means we will not be getting back together, and none of this is your fault. This is something that just happened. But we will always love you no matter what."

Inform professionals and adult role models — such as doctors, teachers, counselors, coaches and troop leaders — involved in the child's life. Communicating with adults involved in the child's daily life helps parents track their child's progress in dealing with the divorce.

One parent might not be around to help raise the children. In any case, the custodial parent should reassure children of their love and affection. Parents might also want to reassure children that the other parent still loves them despite their absence.

Transitions and holidays

Transitions between homes and separation from one parent during holidays are often stressful for preschoolers and elementary-age children. They can handle longer separations at this age than when they were toddlers, but do not let too much time pass between visits. Children and parents need time together to maintain strong bonds and reconnect in meaningful ways.

Brief transitions ease tension between parents and allow for calmer and more cooperative interaction. Regular visitation schedules help reduce children's anxiety about the divorce and make them more comfortable in each home. Furthermore, research shows that preschoolers and elementary-age children of divorce and separation adjust better during transitions when both parents can be reassuring and positive. Children who are often reminded of their parents' love and affection have an easier time settling into each home environment.

Around this age, children also become more aware of holiday celebrations with friends and family members. To avoid conflict, parents should consider including important family celebrations in their parenting plan. Other than major religious and cultural holidays, birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day are also special celebrations to work into a co-parenting schedule.

Introducing new adults

After divorce, parents commonly meet and develop relationships with new people. Every child will have a different reaction to new adults entering their lives. Children might enjoy having another adult role model, a happier parent and more caring individuals in their life. However, new adults can also negatively affect the child. Once their parents start seeing other people, the child might feel hurt because they think their parents will never get back together. Some children believe they have to share their parent, which is difficult at this age. Children might feel conflicted about how to behave around a new person or worry about the future of the new relationship. Parents should reassure their children that they are loved and no one will come between them.

Parents should consider how to appropriately explain to children that they will start dating again. Young children might need only a simple description of the new partner as a friend. Parents could say something along the lines of, "I'm

going to spend three hours with my friend tonight. I will be home after you go to sleep.” Elementary-age children usually understand more about dating than preschoolers. When describing the new partner to these children, parents can say things like, “I’m going to [dinner or a movie] with a [man or woman] I met [at work or through a friend]. We will spend a couple hours talking before I come back home.”

When parents enter into a long-term relationship, they might want to discuss with their new partner how to introduce them to their child. The parent should judge when is the best time to tell the children, but children are more likely to benefit in the long run if introductions are delayed until the relationship becomes serious. If children meet every new person in their parent’s post-divorce life, they might grow emotionally attached to each. But if those people leave, children might then feel upset, confused and abandoned, similar to how they might have felt after their parents’ divorce. Take things slow and wait to introduce a new partner until everyone has adjusted and is ready.

Importance of self-care

Parents might face some stressful and overwhelming challenges when caring for preschoolers and elementary-age children of divorce. For example, parents might struggle with busy schedules for their children’s school and activities, especially if the other parent is not around to help. Moreover, losing sleep, forgetting to eat and becoming depressed or frequently distressed compound these struggles. The better a parent’s mental and physical health, the better equipped they are to make good parenting decisions. These self-care practices can help divorced or separated parents:

- Get enough sleep and manage your free time.
- Maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly.
- Take care of your personal hygiene.
- Practice relaxation techniques.
- Communicate cooperatively with the other parent.

Parents might also want to pack healthy snacks for themselves and their children when traveling. Both parent and child benefit when parents set aside one-on-one time with each child to strengthen their relationship, such as by reading to their children before bedtime or making crafts with them. Bonding can reduce stress, and children might also feel more secure in their relationship with their parent.

Conclusion

The divorce process is stressful and confusing for preschoolers and school-age children. Their parents’ interactions and the contact they have with each parent greatly influence their reactions. Even so, children eventually adapt to the new reality following divorce.

The main thing to remember in responsible co-parenting is to always put children’s needs first. Children need healthy, functioning parents who can make cooperate to make decisions. They also need both parents to be involved in their lives and provide structure and nurturance. These considerations help co-parents give their children the love, care and stability appropriate for their age.

Additional information

Below is a list of recommended books for divorced or separated parents to read to their children:

- **Two Homes** — Emphasizes what a child gains rather than loses during a divorce
- **Standing on My Own Two Feet** — Story of a boy being reassured that he is not to blame for a divorce
- **Was it the Chocolate Pudding?** — A 6-year-old boy helps his younger brother understand complex phrases associated with divorce and separation
- **Way I Feel** series of books — Picture-books about learning to express emotions in family challenges

North Dakota State has a guide on figuring out how to talk to your children about your divorce, available at <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/famscl/fs568.pdf>.

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- Schoppe, S. J., Mangelsdorf, S. C., & Frosch, C. A. (2001). Coparenting, family process, and family structure: Implications for preschoolers’ externalizing behavior problems. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 526-545.

Related MU Extension Publications

- GH6129 *Parenting: Success Requires a Team Effort*
- GH6130 *Developing a Parenting Plan: A Guide for Divorcing Parents*
- GH6602 *Activities for Helping Children Deal with Divorce*
- GH6607 *Helping Infants and Toddlers Adjust to Divorce*

This guide was originally developed by Kim Leon and Kelly Cole.