



Tips for Parents: Divorce

Most statistics point to an average of about 50% of marriages in the United States ending in divorce. Divorce rates for couples with children are only slightly less than for couples without. Since the highest rates for divorce occur between 20 and 39 years old, many children are affected.

How the divorce is portrayed to the children, and how the ex-spouses treat one another makes a huge difference in how healthfully the kids will cope with the change and will move forward to successful relationships of their own. In *Tips for Parents: Divorce*, learn ways to help your children through this difficult time.

Breaking the News

If you and your spouse have been fighting loudly for some time, your divorce may come as no surprise to the kids. Regardless, it is important to focus on the kids' feelings and put aside any anger or resentment you have when telling your children of the divorce. Here are a few tips parents can use when announcing your divorce to your children.

- Choose a time when everyone is calm and can devote enough time to the conversation.
- If possible, have both parents present.
- Take turns speaking and explaining, and avoid blame or angry comments.
- Explain what will happen, and focus especially on how it will affect the children's lives. Explain who will live where, when the move will happen, and when the children will be able to see each parent. If you don't know all the details yet, say so, but give the kids a date when you will know.
- Take time to reassure the kids that the divorce is not their fault and that both parents will continue to love and parent them.
- Allow the children to ask questions and try to answer them as truthfully and factually as possible without going into unnecessary or ugly details.
- Explain that they may feel angry, sad, scared, or even happy, and whatever feelings they have are normal and OK for them.
- Give kids time now, and regularly in the future, to talk about their feelings--either with you or a trusted friend or family member.
- It's OK for you to calmly express your feelings as well. Say something like, "This is a confusing and strange time for all of us, and I feel mad/angry/scared about this. Over time, we'll all adjust and things will get better." If the divorce comes as an immense relief to you, say so, but respect that your children may not feel the same way. If they do, let them know that's OK too.

Making the Transition

How you and your ex relate to each other after the divorce is very important to how healthfully your kids will recover from this change and have happy relationships as they grow. These do's and don'ts will give parents tips to help everyone transition into their new lives as easily as possible:

- Do make sure that the kids have a comfortable, welcoming space of their own in both houses. While they may have to pack some clothes or homework with them when visiting, favorite stuffed animals, toothbrushes, pajamas, and a cozy space make them feel at home in both places.
- As much as possible, do keep to a schedule. Predictability and stability are an important factor in your kids' abilities to adjust to this change in their lives.
- Do keep a calendar of events and visits, give your ex a copy, and let children know what will be happening the day before. This helps prevent forgotten visits, missed pick up times, or other conflicts over schedules. When kids know what will be happening in advance, they feel more secure.
- Don't bad mouth your ex to your children or in front of your children, and take great pains that they don't overhear you when you think they aren't listening. You may be angry but that is not your children's burden to bear.
- Do realize that while you and your spouse have ended your relationship, your children need to continue to have a relationship with both of you. Avoid any actions or comments that will make the kids feel they have to side with or choose one or the other of you.
- Do treat interactions with your spouse, such as picking up and talking about the kids, as business like as possible. Be polite, exchange the necessary information, and move on with your day.
- As long as you don't have any legitimate concerns about your children's safety and well being while with your spouse, don't interrogate them after they return to your home. Ask them if they had a good time, and let them take it from there. What your ex does with his/her time, friends, work, or dating is no longer your business, unless it has a significant, negative impact on your kids.
- Do make a reasonable effort to encourage a happy relationship between your children and your ex. Keep him/her informed of important events and accomplishments in your child's life, respect the rules of his/her house, and resist the temptation to automatically side with your child if there is a conflict between them. Be fair. Your child will quickly learn to exploit your negative feelings towards your ex to his or her benefit, and will manipulate both of you if you allow it.
- Do express your feelings in front of your children, and give them the chance to do the same. But don't overwhelm them with your emotional difficulties or allow them to feel that they are responsible for helping you cope or making you feel better. Say something like, "I'm still sad about the divorce, and that is normal. It's not your job to make me feel better. If you are upset, let's talk about it." If your feelings are oppressive and you are struggling to cope on a daily basis,

seek help from a counselor or therapist. There is nothing wrong or weak about getting help so you can be healthy for your children.

Moving On

While your ex will always be your child's parent, there will likely come a time when you are ready to begin the process of dating or finding a partner to share your new life with. Depending on how your marriage ended, and how much time has gone by, you may or may not be ready to move on before your children are able to be comfortable with the idea.

Throughout every step of the divorce, transition, and life afterwards, you should always strive to consider your child's feelings and to act in a way that encourages their short and long term emotional health, and that is still true when you begin dating.

Introducing your child to date after date, or trying to establish a relationship between them early on will cause your child confusion and distress—especially if/when things end. Spare your kids the roller coaster, and try not to have your dates around the house early on. Go elsewhere, or have him/her come over only when the kids aren't there.

Once you're confident things are moving in a more serious direction, you'll want to see how they relate to each other, and that's fine. Don't rush things, and don't force your children to rapidly develop feelings or display affection for the person they've only recently met. No one can replace their parent, and you should respect that. Give all parties time and room to develop their relationship at their own pace, and respect their feelings. It is perfectly acceptable to require your children to be polite, and always encourage them to share their feelings, respectfully.

Counseling

Some divorces are amicable, and everyone is able to move forward in a positive healthy way. Quite often, divorce is emotionally charged and can even shake a person's foundation—causing people to act out or stuff their emotions in a harmful way. Divorce can leave people feeling defeated, empty, depressed and so drained it can be a struggle to function from day to day. When this happens, it's time to get help.

Take a look at how you are coping, and keep a close eye on your kids. These are some warning signs that you should seek the help of a professional such as a counselor, therapist or psychologist:

- Sudden change in behavior or personality that lasts for more than a couple of days
- Acting out verbally or physically
- Engaging in risk taking behaviors
- Becoming withdrawn
- A drop in grades
- Sudden weight gain or loss

- Lack of interest in normal activities
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Persistent feelings of sadness, worry, no hope, wanting to hurt one's self or others, or no longer wanting to live—GET HELP IMMEDIATELY

Make Your Children a Priority

Sometimes people get so caught up in their emotions towards the ex that they don't act like themselves—becoming selfish and forgetting that their children are struggling too and need their help.

Your children need you. Commit now to supporting them, listening to their feelings, and refraining from trying to harm their relationship with your ex. Give them the love and attention they deserve, and you'll all benefit now and in the future.

For more information:

[Kids' Health's Tips for Divorcing Parents](#)

[FamilyEducation.com's Divorce Information for Parents](#)

[Mayo Clinic's Children and Divorce: Helping Kids Cope with a Breakup](#)

You may also find these related Tips for Parents helpful:

[Tips for Parents: Listening to Your Kids](#)

[Tips for Parents: Teenage Stress](#)

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