

## Suggestions for Helping Children through Divorce or Separation

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### Getting Your Children Through This

Many divorcing parents are surprised when they realize how much control they have over the way their children live through their divorce. There's actually a good bit you can do to make your children's lives easier while you go through a divorce.

1. Be available to listen.
2. To the extent possible, tell your children why you are divorcing. And if at all possible, no matter how painful, try to tell them when the whole family (including both spouses and all children) is together.
3. Be yourself. You can't be both parents.
4. Reassure your children early and often that your divorce is not their fault.
5. Don't use the child as a messenger in parental communications, as in "Tell your father he's late with the child support payment."
6. Don't argue or fight with the spouse while your child is listening. Experts say the amount of conflict the child witnesses during and immediately after the divorce is a crucial factor in his or her adjustment.
7. Divorce is a time of great change for both of you and for your children. Try to minimize these changes. For example, try to keep them in the same school and home if possible, as well as the same afterschool activities.
8. Try to use consistent discipline. For example, try to agree with each other about what movies or TV programs are permitted, what bedtime is appropriate, what language is permitted, etc.
9. Don't use the child as a weapon. Children need quality time with both parents. It's unfair to restrict their access to one of their parents, no matter how willing the children may seem at the time.
10. Don't use your children as spies. If they want to tell you about time spent with the other parent (and they usually don't) listen closely and politely, and then stop. If they don't volunteer any information, try simply, "Have a good time? Good."
11. Don't make your children take sides in any dispute with your spouse. Children generally want to make both their parents happy. Don't make them choose.
12. Don't criticize your spouse in front of the child. Remember that your spouse is still your child's parent; when you criticize your spouse, whether you mean it or not, you're also criticizing your child indirectly.
13. Let your child be a child. It's easy, but wrong, to make your adolescent child, or even your adult child, a confidant in dealing with your recovery, your dating life, or your fears. Even if children seem capable of handling these concerns without ill effects, they rarely are.
14. Don't be afraid to get outside help. Sometimes children of divorcing parents are angry or scared and they don't know how to deal with their feelings. Perhaps they "act out," meaning they misbehave. When your children "act out," a professional counselor or therapist may be helpful to coach them through more constructive ways of expressing their feelings.
15. Keep your promises. Another way to put this is, don't make promises you don't know you can keep. Consistently keeping your promises lets your child know that he or she can trust you, which will help him or her adjust to your divorce more easily. Divorcing parents often make unrealistic promises

out of guilt. If you've made a promise and realize later you can't keep it, acknowledge it to your child. You may think he or she has forgotten about the promise, but this rarely happens.

16. Don't give up. Even if you're separated by distance, there are all kinds of things you can do to be a good parent.
17. Take care of yourself. One of the easiest mistakes to make in a divorce is to get so busy dealing with everyone else's pain that you forget to get help for yourself. Enter counseling, meet with your minister or rabbi, talk to your plants, anything you can think of to keep your own sanity. You owe it to yourself and you owe it to your kids.
18. Maintain relationships and routine. One of the many reasons divorce is so painful for children is that their relationships with each parent is constantly being tested and redefined. One of the gifts you can give your children is to allow as many parts of their life as possible to remain unchanged. Examples include relationships (for instance, with grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors and friends), and other things like bedtimes, bunny rabbits and bananas.

## **Feelings**

### **Anger**

#### **The Problem**

Children whose parents are divorcing have a great deal to be angry about. Just about every child going through a divorce is an angry child. There may be some exceptions, but not many.

Don't take comfort that your child seems to be adjusting to your divorce without anger. Many children who portray a calm, even cheerful demeanor through divorce are seething inside, and they may later express their anger in destructive ways, like depression (mental health officials call this "anger turned inward"), substance abuse, and/or delinquency. In addition, repressed anger often shows up disguised as sickness, for example, headaches, sleeplessness, nausea and diarrhea.

#### **What to Do**

Figure out ways that both you and your children can better understand anger. The first principle both of you need to understand is that anger as a feeling is normal, appropriate and healthy. Neither you nor your child should attempt to suppress angry feelings. What both of you must do is to develop healthy ways of dealing with anger as behavior so that it doesn't harm persons or property.

All of us can benefit from talking about our feelings more, particularly angry children. The problem with this for you is that it takes really tough skin.

- Can you listen to your child say "I'm angry with you" or "I hate you" without feeling a need to defend yourself?
- Can you listen to your own child say "I hate Daddy / Mommy" without jumping to agree?
- Can you hear your child talk about how miserable he or she is without jumping in to fix it?

If so, good. If not, get your child with someone who can.

The need to deal with anger constructively is particularly critical with absent fathers. This means that mothers must allow (sometimes force) access with fathers, and fathers must allow children to express their anger directly. If you're an absent father, try to model for your child the constructive expression of anger by talking about your own anger (but not your anger towards your child's mother) openly and honestly.

## **Anxiety**

### **The Problem**

We all worry. Worry is normal and sometimes healthy. When fears continue over several days or weeks, however, or when they interfere with our ability to carry out normal routines, we may need help to deal with them. Children of divorcing parents often struggle with anxiety.

Anxiety comes about through feelings of abandonment, changes in living conditions, embarrassment, guilt, concern about additional separations, and a haunting fear of additional unknown trouble that must be lurking somewhere in the future.

Some of the physical symptoms of continuing anxiety are nausea, diarrhea, headaches, and dizziness, as well as (particularly in younger children) thumb-sucking and bed-wetting. Children suffering from anxiety often become demanding or clingy and they may pull back from existing friendships with peers.

### **What to Do**

First, deal with your own perfectly normal feelings of anxiety with someone other than your child. Your child has enough problems to deal with without having to serve as your counselor or confidant. Don't be afraid to ask your child to tell you about his or her fears, and be willing to listen to them – all of them.

Be willing to hear and respond to the same fear over and over. Just because you've explained before that you and the child are not going to have to leave this school district doesn't mean the fear isn't still there. Your child may need to express it again and hear your explanations again.

As you listen to your child, be realistic in responding to the fears he or she expresses. If the fear is that Mommy will never come back, and you honestly know whether Mommy will ever come back, you need to say so. By the same token, of course, whenever you can offer reassurance that a fear will not come true, do so, patiently, logically and thoroughly.

Do whatever you can, within the constraints of the divorce itself, to give your child a stable environment. Your child is under siege from all the changes in his or her life. Anything you can do to minimize those changes, especially in the critical first few months after your separation, will ease your child's anxiety.

This information was provided by <http://www.divorceinfo.com/children.htm>

### **A New Family Bill of Rights**

- Each child has the right to have two homes where he or she is cherished and given the opportunity to develop normally.
- Each child has the right to a meaningful, nurturing relationship with each parent.
- Each parent and child has the right to call themselves a family regardless of how the children's time is divided.
- Each parent has the responsibility and right to contribute to the raising of his or her child.
- Each child has the right to have competent parents and to be free from hearing, observing, or being part of their parent's arguments or problems with one another.
- Each parent has the right to his or her own private life and territory and to raise the children without unreasonable interference from the other parent.

This information was taken from *"Mom's House, Dad's House: A Complete Guide for Parents who are Separated, Divorced or Remarried"* by Isolina Ricci, PhD.

### Suggestions for Shared Custody

The parties agree to:

\_\_\_\_\_ Joint legal custody means that both parents have equal rights and responsibilities toward the minor child/ren. Specifically, decisions relating to the non-emergency medical care, psychological treatment, educational programs, religious upbringing and social environment of the child/ren shall require the mutual consent of both parents.

\_\_\_\_\_ The parents shall notify one another 14 days prior to any changes in address or telephone number at which the child/ren will be residing.

\_\_\_\_\_ Neither parent shall remove the child/ren from Humboldt County for the purpose of changing the child/ren's residence without the consent of the other parent.

\_\_\_\_\_ Each parent shall inform the other as soon as reasonably possible of any illness requiring medical attention or any other emergency involving the children.

\_\_\_\_\_ The parents/mother/father agree(s) not to use alcohol or illicit drugs 24 hours prior to and during that parent's periods of responsibility for the child/ren.

\_\_\_\_\_ Neither parent shall do anything to alienate the child/ren from the other parent or impair the natural development of the child/ren's love and respect for each of the parents.

\_\_\_\_\_ In the event that a parent is unable to exercise his /her periods of responsibility for the child/ren, that parent shall give notice to the other at the earliest possible opportunity.

\_\_\_\_\_ Either parent may obtain emergency medical treatment for the child/ren without the other parent's consent.

\_\_\_\_\_ Each parent shall provide the other with information concerning the well-being of the child/ren, including, but not limited to, copies of report cards, school meeting notices, request for conferences, order forms for school pictures and school calendars; all communications from health-care providers, counselors and day-care providers.

\_\_\_\_\_ Should either parent require child care for a period of \_\_\_\_\_ hours or more while the child/ren is/are in their physical custody, the other parent shall be advised and given the opportunity to provide such care for the child/ren before other arrangements are made for child care.

\_\_\_\_\_ Responsibility for providing transportation shall be assumed by \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ The child/ren shall be picked up and returned at the designated times. Should a delay become necessary, the other parent shall be notified immediately.

\_\_\_\_\_ The terms and conditions of this custody arrangement may be supplemented or revised by mutual agreement of the parents. Changes shall be in writing and signed by both parents.