

Separation and divorce: Helping your child/teen cope with change

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Reactions: Feelings

After experiencing a separation/divorce your child/teen may feel:

- Guilty
- Angry
- Grief
- Confused
- Sad
- Alone
- Scared, frightened
- Worried
- Hopeless
- Relief
- Happy

Reactions: Behaviour

Your child/teen may exhibit the following behaviours:

- Defiance and opposition (“At Daddy’s I’m allowed”)
- Crying
- Angry outbursts and/or Blaming parents
- Deliberately try to emotionally hurt you (“Mom’s right, you are a loser”)
- Little or no response (may internalize thoughts and emotions)
- Express thoughts and feelings through play (younger children)
- Express worry about what will happen to them

Needs of Children and Teens

After experiencing a separation or divorce, your child/teen needs:

- Reassurance: that they are loved, that parents will be okay
- Questions answered (age appropriately)
- Clarification on what is going to happen to each family member after the divorce
- Love and support
- Consistency and predictability

Voice of a child

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bTFZ8cvHo>

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Ways to help child/teen adjust

- Remind your child/teen that they are loved and that both parents will always be their parents.
- Remind them that even if parents stop loving each other, parents can never stop loving their child.
- Reinforce that your child/teen is not to blame for the separation/divorce, there is nothing they could have done or not done to change what is happening.

Ways to help child/teen adjust

- It's also ok, to say that they are “grown up” problems or “grown up” situations, that have to be taken care of by the grown ups. Remind them that there is nothing they can do to “fix this” or make it go back to the way it was before.
- Allow your child to choose whom they want to receive support from. Talk with your child about whom they do and don't want to talk about the divorce with

Ways to help child/teen adjust

- Communicate with your child and teen (check ins: “you seem upset, are you thinking about Mommy and Daddy being apart?”)
- Ask and answer questions (providing age appropriate information)
- Remember you don’t have to have all the answers
- Be an empathic listener to their story, pain and questions

How to be an empathic listener

- Create safe, private space to talk
- Validate their feelings (feelings are real, sometimes the thinking behind the feelings might be distorted)
- Check your own feelings (guilt, blame, anger) and don't let it cloud your ability to empathize
- Set limits (eg. length of time, number of times, etc)

TED Ed – How to do empathy?



Ways to help child/teen adjust

- Do not pressure child regarding where to live
 - let child make their decision of who they want to live with
 - you can help them think it through (pros and cons to both homes)
- Keep consistency in their lives when possible with routines, expectations, consequences, etc. Ensure these are consistent across both households.
- If there are different rules at different house, ensure these are communicated clearly – Rules Charts with Pictures are helpful for younger children

Ways to help child/teen adjust

- Inform your child of any upcoming changes/transitions - this will help ease anxiety later on!
- Keep promises you make to your child: don't skip visits/contact
 - call your child/teen in advance if plans change

Ways to help child/teen adjust

- Allow your children time to grieve, and remember that children grieve differently from adults - they “visit” grief so be prepared for questions and teachable moments.
- While many things are changing, remind children of what are the things that are staying the same.
- Be emotionally and physically available to your child/teen. Spend time doing activities together that will take their minds off things

Ways to help child/teen adjust

- If your child/teen is blaming the divorce for everything else that is making them unhappy (eg. bad grades, arguments with friends, etc), help them learn to take responsibility for themselves, and change their outlook, by exploring different ways to cope and problem solve a situation.
- Remind them that no one is “all good” or “all bad”, we all make mistakes.

Ways to help child/teen adjust



Create a conflict free zone!

- If amicable, maintain open communication with the other parent
- Communicate with the other parent and keep them informed about how your child/teen has been doing while in your care, so they can continue to support any needs

Creating a “Conflict Free Zone” cont.

- Encourage your child/teen to have a positive relationship with the other parent, reinforce they are not betraying you if they have fun with and love the other parent
- Avoid arguing with the other parent in front of your child/teen/ (make alternative arrangement to discuss)

Ways to help child/teen adjust

- If possible, help child preserve relationships with extended family members, especially grandparents
- Ask extended family members to refrain from
 - ‘grilling’ your child about legal matters involving the other parent
 - speaking negatively about the other parent
- Utilize any family supports, to help maintain your own self-care

Ways to help child/teen adjust

- Take care of your own emotional and mental health – seek support when required
- Allow yourself time to grieve the loss of the relationship
- If you are ready to date romantically, remind your child that their relationship with another adult, is different from, and does not change, nor take anything away from the love you feel for them.

Caution!

Be mindful when interacting with your child/teen and

avoid:

- speaking negatively, criticizing or blaming the other parent (creates mixed emotions for the child/teen)
- Asking the child/teen to align against the other parent (“picking sides”)
- Discussing adult information regarding the separation/divorce in front of the child/teen (remember kids listen to everything!)

Caution! cont.

Avoid:

- Over-sharing information of angry/resentful feelings with your child/teen
- Seeking comfort and support from your children – seek professional help if you need it.
- Forcing your children to talk to you about their feelings – physical comfort and role modeling your own coping strategies can be just as effective
- Asking your child/teen for a report on what happened at other parent's house

Coping Strategies

To help feel calmer during times of distress, children/teens can engage in:

- Deep breathing (e.g. “breathing in colours” exercise)
- Art (e.g. drawing, colouring mandalas)
- Music (e.g. listening to or playing musical instrument)
- Exercise (e.g. walk around neighbourhood, stretching)
- Play (e.g., lego, cars, dolls, games)
- Visualization (e.g. Calm App)
- Positive Thinking (noticing positive aspects to the situation)

Positives from divorce?

- Children/Teens can become resilient and adaptable
- Children/Teens can become more self-sufficient
- Children/Teens can develop an increased sense of empathy toward others
- The idea of marriage isn't taken for granted
- Children/Teens can learn more through quality time spent with each parent separately
- They meet people they otherwise wouldn't have met

When to consult a professional?

Monitor any signs of distress:

- ongoing low mood/sadness
- difficulty sleeping
- emotional outbursts
- changes to their physical health
- changes in eating habits
- school refusal
- separation anxiety
- loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed

What supports are available?

- Talk to your school administration about supports available at school, including School Board Counselling
- Access counselling through:
 - Employee Assistance Programs
 - Family Health Teams – Mental Health clinicians
 - Psychologist and Social Workers – may be covered by benefits
 - Community based counselling programs (see hand out)
- Legal Aid and Office of the Children’s Lawyer

Questions?

Thanks for listening.

Joanna & Sarah