

Being aware of your children's individual needs will make it easier for you to make healthy decisions for them. While responses vary with age, and some issues are unique to only certain age groups, many children experience sadness, anger, anxiety, fear, rejection, and loneliness. There is no definitive evidence that divorce is easier or more difficult on one age group than another. It is also important to remember that your child will experience the divorce differently throughout the course of their life. Even though your child might be very intelligent, and seemingly able to understand everything, this understanding will grow deeper as your child matures.

Communicate with your children about the divorce. To do this, you must be at least somewhat comfortable talking about these issues. Or, as an alternative, you can be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. It might be difficult for your children to see you struggling emotionally, but it is a valuable life lesson for them to see you deal with difficult issues and recover from them. You should speak with your children at their appropriate age levels (see the reference list for some excellent books on how to do this). With all children, your communications should include ample doses of love and affirmation. Encourage your children to ask questions, and allow them to express emotions. By allowing your children to express their concerns and feelings, you are keeping the lines of communication open and teaching them coping strategies. At first, it might be difficult to witness your child's emotional reactions. It is important for you to not overreact to what they are feeling. Let them know it is OK to feel that way, and that feelings are temporary and likely to change. Now, let's take a closer look at how kids of different ages are affected by divorce.

#### *What reactions should I expect from my infant or toddler?*

Infants and toddlers need consistency in their contact with parents. Unpredictable daily routines, hostility between parents, or frequent exposure to emotional upset are central sources of psychological stress. Infants distressed by major changes in their routine may exhibit sleeping or eating/digestive problems, or excessive crying.

Toddlers (18-24 months) are challenged differently than infants. While they are working on the developmental achievements of separation and individuation, they still have many dependency needs. Toddlers are also dealing with security issues when they are apart from their parents. A parent's partial or complete disappearance can be a frightening experience. Toddlers may exhibit many of the same symptoms as infants; it is also common for toddlers to show heightened irritability, aggression, lethargy, temper tantrums, night terrors, and regression, including the loss of previously acquired toilet-training skills. Heightened separation anxiety from either parent is another common symptom at this age.

#### *How can I best assist my infant or toddler?*

Whenever and wherever possible, create stability. Infants and toddlers need a stable environment and regular schedules. Under most circumstances, frequent contact with both parents is best. Infants have a limited memory, but it is recommended that the nonresident parent spend at least a few hours with an infant every two or three days. These visits should be characterized by lots of cuddling, talking, storytelling, and playing. This type of regular interaction, coupled with paying attention to a child's individual needs, helps create a healthy and secure environment.

Like infants, toddlers thrive on schedule and routine, and they enjoy a lot of parental contact. When it comes to visitation, toddlers also thrive best with a regular schedule that is comfortable for both parents. In some families, this will include daytime contact several times a week and regular telephone calls a few times a week. In other families, overnight stays with the non-resident parent can take place. Parents need to figure out what works best for their kids. Unless there are special or unusual circumstances, parents should be supportive of overnight stays with the nonresident parent. Remember to make time for lots of cuddling, playing, fantasy, and make-believe.

*What reactions should I expect from my preschooler?*

Children in the three- to five-year-old range have limited ability to make sense of parental loss, and they may blame the divorce on themselves. They may believe that a parent's emotional distress or anger, and even the divorce, is their fault. Regression to earlier behaviors is common; for example, loss of developmental accomplishments in sleeping, eating, motor activity, language, toilet training, emotional independence, and social relationships. There may be excessive clinging or crying when a parent leaves to go to another part of the house, and transitions between homes are frequently difficult. Expressions of anger and temper tantrums are common in preschool children. It is important for parents to see these reactions as normal and appropriate given the situation. Most of these setbacks and problem behaviors will diminish in time.

*How can I best assist my preschooler?*

Keep in mind that most children this age have some separation anxiety, whether their parents are getting divorced or not. A separation or divorce might intensify that anxiety. Children accustomed to having both parents at home can become anxious at the thought of one parent moving out. Reassure children that the change means that they will have two homes now. Take them to the new home (both parents together, if possible) and show them where Mom or Dad will be staying. The more comfortable you are with separating physically, the more comfortable your child will be.

Preschoolers thrive on consistent and stable routines. Contact with both parents should be conflict free and predictable. Regular and frequent visitation by the nonresident parent is also important. You will find that your efforts at providing a stable routine for your preschooler will pay off. It will help them feel secure. In addition, regular contact with the nonresident parent will help minimize or eliminate any feelings of rejection. Parents can reduce their child's stress by maintaining a daily routine, eliminating open conflict, and gaining emotional stability for themselves. Avoid speaking negatively about the absent parent and focus more on giving your child permission to stay connected with the absent parent. Telephone contact between parents and children should be encouraged.

It is very important to reassure your young children that the divorce is not their fault. Relationships, you should explain, are very complicated, and sometimes they end before people expect them to. Just as their behavior did not cause the divorce, they should be reminded that it is not their responsibility to keep their parents together. You can also remind them that you will always be a family, and that both parents will always love and

care for them. Children this age will understand these ideas to varying degrees. As they get older, it will still be important for children to hear this, but they will understand it differently.

*What reactions should I expect from my six- to eight-year-old child?*

Early elementary-age school children are developing feelings of competence and mastery. Children undergoing a divorce at this age may also regress and show less initiative or willingness to use previously acquired skills. They may exhibit anxiety, restlessness, increased moodiness, tantrums, or separation problems. Signs of sadness, stress, or depression may take the form of physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach problems, and tiredness. You might also see a withdrawal from peers and pleasurable activities, a refusal to do homework or go to school, and changes in bedtime routine, among others. These symptoms are often a child's attempt to get reassurance or increased contact with parents.

Young children will often struggle to be loyal to both parents. This struggle might be expressed in many ways; it may take the form of trying to over please parents and be perfect. On the other hand, it might be expressed through anger toward one or both parents. Keep in mind that a range of reactions is possible. You will probably be challenged by your children's reactions because you don't want to see them hurt, which will increase your own stress level. Remind yourself that these responses are normal, and in time you should see a great improvement. Allow yourself to notice times when your child is coping well with the situation. Let them know you notice their efforts and are proud of them.

*How can I best assist my six- to eight-year-old child?*

The foremost protective factor for young children (all children!) is to minimize parental conflict, especially when children are present. Children openly exposed to such conflict, whether overt or subtle, tend to have poorer psychological adjustment to the divorce. Second, divorcing parents need to provide warmth and emotional support, adequate monitoring, authoritative discipline, and age-appropriate expectations. Younger children who receive these protective factors adjust far better than children whose parents are inattentive or less supportive, or use coercive discipline. Lastly, significant contact with both parents following a divorce is crucial. Several studies have found that children who maintain close relationships with both parents have more positive adjustment and better academic performance after divorce than those who do not.

Other important practices include keeping routines consistent, maintaining friendships and connections with significant relatives, and speaking with your child's teachers. Make teachers aware of the transitions going on with your child, and ask them to be prompt in discussing any of their concerns with you.

*What reactions should I expect from my nine- to twelve-year-old child?*

Elementary-school children feel extreme loss when a divorce occurs, but it is not impossible for parents to rebuild a child's sense of security. Keep the lines of communication open, but don't press your children to express their feelings if they are not ready to. Older elementary-school children may experience divided loyalties, which can be especially painful if one or both parents attempt to enlist the child "on their side" in an adversarial divorce process.

These children frequently convert painful feelings of loss, helplessness, and sadness into anger, which is more tolerable to them than emotional vulnerability. Low self-esteem and decreased academic performance are also common.

Anger directed at one or both parents is not uncommon. Children may take on the belief system of the parent they feel is being treated unfairly (usually the one who was more hurt). An alliance with one parent can be comforting to that parent, but it is not a healthy situation. Parents should not encourage such alliances, no matter how vindicated it makes them feel. Doing so can help foster feelings of guilt when the child is older.

Also common at this age are changes in the amount of time spent with peers. You might see an increase in time your child spends with friends or a sharp decline in peer interactions. Both can be normal, and you should make room for either reaction. At the same time, be aware of behavior at either extreme. Not uncommon is for children this age to fantasize about parents getting back together. Look for opportunities to discuss gently and respectfully the reality of this hope.

Look for signs that your child may be over-functioning. Some children this age try to act perfectly so as not to disappoint their parents. They live with the idea that if they behave perfectly, their parents will not get divorced. At the other extreme are children who begin to regress into behaviors they had long since abandoned. Again, you should be prepared for both possibilities and make room for either if they occur.

Physical complaints parents should be aware of include headaches, stomachaches, changes in sleeping habits, and appetite changes, among others. Most of these physical complaints should ebb in time. If you notice them for extended periods (longer than 2 months) you should consult your family physician or a mental-health professional.

#### *How can I best assist my 9- to 12-year old?*

It is best to communicate clear and consistent expectations to your child. Let them know that their feelings are valid, but how they express them is important. For example, let them know that their anger is normal, and offer them positive alternatives for expressing it. There should be consequences for bad or inappropriate behavior, and parents should not feel guilty about disciplining their child. Take physical complaints seriously, however; remember that a child's reaction to stress is often manifested through a physical complaint. Whenever possible, keep your children involved in healthy activities including sports, clubs, or creative outlets. Remember to support their interests, and make what is important to them important to you. Both parents should be involved in a child's extracurricular activities. Children will sense and react to a parent who is too busy to spend time with them, and this is one of many ways to show that you are concerned and involved.

#### *What reactions should I expect from my adolescent?*

Adolescence is a period of substantial flux on all developmental fronts. Teenagers are dealing with their emerging sexuality, solidifying their identity, coping with peer pressure, and moving toward increased autonomy. When parents divorce, adolescents must deal with

these developmental issues as well as adjust to the changes associated with the divorce. While some teens fare well as they face the challenges of a divorce, others exhibit moderate to severe emotional distress. This distress will most likely be manifested in most or all areas of a teen's life.

In addition, adolescents are capable of expressing their distress about the divorce in alarming new ways. Teenagers can exhibit intense anger, abuse illicit drugs or alcohol, engage in sexual activities, physically hurt themselves, run away, or get in trouble with the law. They may also strongly align themselves with one parent. Dealing with parental dating or remarriage can be especially difficult for children in this age group and may elicit strong emotional reactions from your teen.

#### *How can I best assist my adolescent?*

More than ever, teens experiencing a divorce need emotional support, love, and firm guidance from their parents. When challenges do arise, parents need to distinguish between a normal adolescent response, a typical reaction to divorce, and something deeper and more serious. For example, many parents need to differentiate between normal mood swings and the anger and depression associated with the stresses of divorce. This is easier said than done. Teenagers' depressed feelings can mirror classic symptoms of depression. Trouble sleeping, sleeping too much, poor concentration, low energy or fatigue, feelings of hopelessness, and depressed mood are all possibilities. You might also see increased irritability, withdrawal from friends or family members, suicidal thoughts, fighting, and highly dangerous acting-out behaviors such as self-cutting. If you have any doubts that the anger or depression that your adolescent is feeling goes beyond what might be considered normal given the situation, you should immediately consult a mental-health professional to get another opinion.

Encourage your teenager to communicate without pressing them to do so. Show respect for their boundaries, but be on the lookout for opportunities when they want to talk. It is not uncommon to hear a response of 'fine' to all of your inquiries about how they are doing. This is typical, as many teenagers will not want to discuss the divorce or their feelings. Let them know this is OK, while occasionally reminding them that you are willing to talk when they are. Giving them permission not to talk about their feelings also gives them room to talk with you when they are ready. Reassuring and approving of their unique and individual responses is vital during this transition time.

As with other age groups, consistency around rules and expectations is vital. At the same time, you should be flexible when necessary. Remember to support your teen in whatever hobbies, interests, or activities they are involved in. Many adolescents deal with a divorce by distancing from family members and immersing themselves in an outside activity. If this is the case, you should look for help from extended family members, teachers, coaches, and anyone else in the community who can be of help. Keep in mind that most teenagers reconnect with their family once the transitions associated with the divorce become more familiar.



Most experts agree that an important way of empowering teens is to involve them in decisions regarding living arrangements, school, and visitation, where appropriate. This will give them a sense of control and help them feel like part of the process, instead of totally removed from important decisions affecting them. In addition, remind yourself that there will be ups and downs during the process, but that teens can cope successfully with their parents' divorce and the changes it brings. You may even discover some unexpected positives. Many teens find their parents are actually happier after the divorce, or they may develop new and better ways of relating to both parents when they have separate time with each one.

Some teens become more compassionate and kind when a younger brother or sister needs their support and care. Siblings who are closer in age may form tighter bonds, learning to count on each other more because they're facing the challenges of their parents' divorce together. Coping well with divorce also can bring out strength and maturity in teens. They may become more responsible, independent, and thoughtful. Some become better problem solvers, better listeners, or better friends.

Most teens learn—sometimes to their surprise—that they can make it through this difficult situation successfully. Giving it time, letting others support them along the way, and keeping an eye on the good things in life can make all the difference.

#### *When should I consult a professional?*

When a child or teen shows significant signs of distress, or when some of the symptoms we have been talking about become chronic or extreme, you may want to consult a mental-health professional. Marriage and family therapists are typically the most qualified through their extensive training in dealing with families in transition. A qualified therapist can provide a safe place for children to express their feelings, to understand the changes happening in their lives, and to develop coping strategies. Therapists can also raise parents' awareness of the post-divorce dynamics that hamper children's positive adjustment. When possible, both parents should be involved in the counseling. Some parents report not wanting to be in the same room with their co-parent. Remember, this is about your children and doing what is best for them. To locate a qualified therapist, visit [www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org)

#### *A note about staying together for the kids*

Often, high conflict couples—and chances are you know at least one or two—stay married for their children's sake. While this is very noble, most experts now agree that it is far better to provide a conflict-free environment for your children than to stay married. Children who come from low-stress and low-conflict homes are more equipped to face life's challenges. They exhibit fewer behavior problems, are less likely to experiment with drugs or alcohol, and overall show more promise than children who come from high-conflict homes. Although these are generalities, it's worth working on providing a low-stress and positive family home environment for yourself and your children.

### **Checklist for identifying and handling challenging behaviors**

- Encourage talking about the divorce, but do not pressure kids to open up.
- Be consistent with consequences when rules are broken (avoid physical punishment and namecalling).
- Ask yourself whether a problem behavior is typical for your child's age.
- Identify times when your children are behaving well and tell them so.
- Make room for angry and sad feelings, realizing this is normal and temporary.
- Provide kids with age-appropriate activities and hobbies.
- Teach children to leave a situation if they are losing control.
- Realize there is a connection between conflict with your spouse and your child's acting out.
- Realize that most challenges and behavior problems will be temporary.
- Seek outside help when problem behaviors are chronic, dangerous, or extreme.

**Components of grief and loss related to the changes in our family.**

### **The Gift of Grieving**

Dealing with grief is an important part of moving on from a divorce. Grief is defined as the conflicting feelings caused by a change in or an end to a familiar pattern of behavior. Not surprisingly, children's experiences of grief will vary depending on their age and individual circumstances. Some divorces precipitate a grief response that is mild and transient, while others threaten the foundation of a child's world. Young children express grief in vastly different ways from teens and adults.

Although the grieving process can be difficult, it is ultimately a healing process. Becoming aware of the stages of grief and working through them ultimately helps us resolve difficult issues and move on. Below are general stages of grief, along with some of the ways children of different ages and adults deal with grief. Keep in mind that moving through various stages of grief is a normal way for children to deal with loss. These stages may vary in order, occur simultaneously, or recur after progress into the next stage. Although painful and difficult, the end result is healing, which ultimately leads to growth.

### **The Stages of Children's Grief**

**Disorganization:** The initial expressions of grief in children range from regression, temper tantrums, and exaggerated fears in younger children to physical symptoms, lack of concentration, and mood swings in older children. The disorganization of early grief is a true crisis for children, but parents and loved ones can help a child through this stage.

**Transition:** Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair follow the stress and chaotic behaviors of the disorganization stage. Many children will exhibit signs of depression. More common are withdrawal, aggression, and difficulty in school.

**Reorganization:** When painful feelings are expressed, their emotional energy wanes, and detachment becomes possible. During this stage, children have more energy and motivation for moving forward to a positive resolution of their grief.

Though children's grief follows this progression, it is complicated by the circular nature of grief. If you've experienced grief in your life, you know this to be true. Just when you have moved forward in your resolution of grief, some reminder of the loss floods you with emotions that bring you right back to feelings of despair and great sorrow. Adults can recognize and understand what is happening with their emotions; children often cannot. Parents must recognize the circular nature of grieving in order to help their children through difficult times during their development.

The final consideration in helping children successfully manage the grieving process is the developmental age of the child. It is important to note that a grieving child's developmental age may lag behind his chronological age. Regression is expected, and developmental accomplishments take longer to achieve.

### **How Preschoolers Express Grief** □

- Bedwetting
- Thumb sucking
- Clinging to adults
- Exaggerated fears
- Excessive crying
- Temper tantrums
- Regression
- Stubbornness

#### **Helping the Grieving Preschooler**

- Answer the child's question honestly and simply; allow them to talk about the loss; help them share their fears and worries.
- Provide simple routines.
- Give the child affection and nurturing; attempt to connect.
- Provide more opportunities for play.
- Be patient with regressive behaviors such as thumb-sucking.
- Provide opportunities for the expression of painful emotions through play, creative outlets, and talk. Teach them to recognize and name their full range of feelings.

### **How Elementary-School-Age Children Express Grief**

- School and learning problems
- Preoccupation with the loss and related worries; daydreaming; trouble paying attention
- Bedwetting; regression; developmental delays
- Eating and sleeping problems (overeating, refusing to eat, nightmares, sleepiness)
- Fighting, anger

#### **Helping the Grieving Elementary-School-Age Child**

- Keep tasks simple. Explain things before they experience them: new neighborhood, school, church, family routines, and changes.



- Provide a structured environment that is predictable and consistent; limit choices; introduce small, manageable choices over time.
- Contain acting-out behavior; insist that children express their wants, needs, and feelings with words, not by acting out.
- Encourage them to let you know when they are worried or having a difficult time.

### **How Pre-Teens and Early Adolescents Express Grief**

- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping and eating disorders, hypochondria), wide mood swings
- Able to verbally express emotions
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Increase in risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors
- Anger; aggression; fighting; contrary or combative behavior
- Withdrawal from adults or peers
- Depression; sadness
- Lack of concentration and attention
- Identity confusion; testing limits

### **Helping the Grieving Pre-Teen and Early Adolescent**

- Accept that they will experience mood swings and physical symptoms.
- Encourage them to honestly recognize their painful feelings and find positive outlets in physical and creative activities.
- Listen for the feelings behind their words and actions, and respond with empathy.
- Be truthful and factual in explaining the loss.
- Help them develop and maintain their sense of identity.
- Allow pre-teens to make choices that are not harmful. Encourage safe expressions and experiences of beginning independence.

- 1. **Denial:** Denial is a common first response that adults experience because they need to believe in the stability of their lives.
- 2. **Anger:** People experiencing anger want to lash out and blame someone for how they feel. They often appear irritable, aggressive, and uncooperative.
- 3. **Bargaining:** In this stage, parents might believe they can save their relationship if they do certain things or make special promises. The bargaining stage allows people to feel they have some control over the situation. In the bargaining stage, parents can focus on hope and thereby delay facing sadness: 'If I do this or that, I can save our marriage.'
- 4. **Depression:** Depression involves a great sense of loss and sadness upon realizing that nothing will stop the divorce. People need to acknowledge and express their feelings of loss and sadness. Denying or repressing these feelings only leads to them resurfacing in destructive ways. On the other hand, making room for these feelings decreases their intensity and duration.
- 5. **Acceptance:** Acceptance means seeing the reality before you and moving beyond the feelings of loss. It begins when there is less depression, more resolution and stability, and people accept the divorce. Acceptance appears gradually and may take months or years to occur. Divorce is a major transition and a journey of growth. There are no absolute rules that determine how the process of healing will occur. Your ability to adapt to divorce will

depend on a lot of factors. One thing is for sure: the sooner you begin to heal, the sooner your children will be on their road to recovery.