

Divorce and the Family

How to Help the Kids

You feel terrible that your marriage has dissolved, but watching your children suffer is the worst. At times you feel personally responsible for their pain. What can you do to help them accept this major change in their lives?

Effects on the Children

Just as all the reasons for a divorce are different, children will accept this loss in their life differently. Some will sail through the change with little disruption and others will be more severely affected. Occasionally, they will feel some relief because the unhappy environment before the divorce was unacceptable to them. Many times they feel that they were the cause for the divorce.

When children are affected by the divorce, certain problems are more common at different ages. Young children can regress by clinging, wetting the bed, having disrupted sleep and reverting to infantile behavior. School-age children can have some difficulties in school, show more disruptive behavior and have short-term difficulty with relationships. Teens frequently engage in negative behaviors, do poorly at school and become rebellious.

When to Seek Help

Divorce is an adult decision. You may need to seek help to avoid feeling guilty over how it may hurt your children. Children can't be spared all the hurts in the world but they need help to develop coping mechanisms to handle the changes. Individual or family counseling would probably benefit your family. Your pediatrician can help you sort out your child's normal developmental behaviors and those that may be caused from the stress of the divorce. You also need to take good care of your health, both physical and mental, in order to serve as the best role model for handling your own stress.

Coping Techniques

Children want to feel secure and know what's going on. They don't need the sordid details of your divorce, but they will feel less stress if there are no secrets where it involves them. That means telling them there's a separation, that the other parent will visit on specific days, and that neither of you loves them less. Assuring them that they're not the cause of the divorce helps considerably.

If the children are old enough, let them have some control in their lives. Where would they like to go on their visitation? How would they like to divide up the holiday? How would they like to keep in contact with the grandparents? Respect your final divorce decree and don't violate it, but let your children have choices when they can.

The hardest thing in a bitter divorce is to maintain respect for the other parent when talking with your children. Criticizing your spouse puts your children in the middle and leaves them confused and unhappy. Messages for your spouse should come from you and not through your children. This is not always easy, but it protects the children from adult game-playing and demonstrates your maturity.

You all need time to heal and to accept your changed lives. You don't need to put your life on hold, but it's important not to rush into a new relationship.



Children will feel less stress if there are no secrets about how a divorce involves them. Include them in as many decisions as possible.