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Tips for Divorcing Parents

Divorce affects the whole family. What's the best way to help your family get through a divorce? Every situation — and every family — is different. But these suggestions can make the process less painful for kids, teens, and families.

Helping Kids Manage Their Feelings

Encourage kids to share their feelings — positive or negative — about what's happening.

It's important for divorcing — and already divorced — parents to sit down with their kids and encourage them to say what they're thinking and feeling. This can be challenging for parents as it may be painful to hear, but try to keep focused on their feelings and perspectives, rather than your own. Assure your kids that their feelings are important, valid, and normal. Let them know that you can handle a conversation about even difficult or painful feelings.

During these conversations, avoid problem-solving and trying to change the way a child feels. Instead, focus on listening and thanking kids for their honesty. Kids often feel a loss of family and may blame you or the other parent — or both — for what's going on in their lives. So, you'll need to be ready to stay calm and answer questions your kids might raise or to address their concerns.

Make talking about the divorce and how it's affecting your kids an ongoing process. As they get older and become more mature, kids might have questions or concerns that they hadn't thought of earlier. Even if it seems like you've gone over the same topics before, keep the dialogue open. If possible, sit down with the other parent and plan how you're going to talk about what's going on.

If you feel like you may get too upset or have trouble staying calm, ask someone else (a relative or family friend they trust) to talk to your kids. It's OK and healthy for kids to see their parents feeling sad or upset, but children can feel responsible for their parents' feelings if the emotions become overwhelming.

If your children do see you struggle with a difficult emotion, model healthy coping as much as possible. Try to:

- Label your emotion for them ("I'm feeling sad right now.").
- State that you know it's OK to feel this way sometimes ("It's OK and normal for me to feel sad").
- Talk about how you'll cope with your tough feelings ("Something that always helps me feel better when I'm sad is baking cookies with you or playing outside. Let's go do it!").

It's natural for kids to have many emotions about a divorce. They might feel guilty and imagine that they "caused" the problem. This is particularly true if kids overheard their parents arguing about them. Kids and teens may feel angry or frightened, or worried about their future. If they voice these emotions, reassure them that this was not the case while reminding them that it's a normal feeling.

Although kids may struggle with a divorce for quite a while, the real impact is usually felt over about a 2- to 3-year period. During this time, some can voice their feelings. But, depending on their age and development, other kids just won't have the words. They may instead act out behaviorally or struggle with their mood. For school-age kids, this might mean their grades drop or they lose interest in activities. For younger children, these feelings are often expressed during play too. Be aware of a "sleeper effect" with young children: They might take big changes in stride at first, but disruptive behaviors or challenging emotions can come up years later. Communicating openly with kids and modeling healthy coping, even if they seem OK with the big changes, can reduce trouble down the road.

It may be tempting to tell a child not to feel a certain way, but kids (and adults, for that matter) have a right to their feelings. And if you try to force a "happy face," your kids may be less likely to share their true feelings with you.

Group programs for kids of divorce run by schools or faith-based organizations are an excellent resource for kids and families who need some help to get through these early stages.

Taking the High Road

Keep adult conflict and arguments away from the kids.

As hard as it may be, it's important to never say bad things about your ex in front of your kids or within earshot. Kids pick up on negativity and may understand what's being said even if you think they are too young to do so. Research shows that the single biggest factor in long-term adjustment for kids of divorce is the level of parental conflict they see. It puts kids in a tough spot if they have to take sides or listen to negative things said about one of their parents.

It's just as important to acknowledge real events. If, for example, one spouse moves out or leaves the family, acknowledge what has happened. It isn't your responsibility to explain your ex's behavior. But if your kids ask you questions, it's important to answer as neutrally and as truthfully as possible.

Try not to use kids as messengers or go-betweens, especially when you're feuding.

Even though it is tempting, don't use your kids as messengers. There are plenty of other ways to communicate with your ex-partner. Also, resist questioning your child about what's happening in the other household. Kids resent it when they feel that they're being asked to "spy" on the other parent. Wherever possible, communicate directly with the other parent about things like scheduling, visitation, health issues, or school problems.

Expect bumps as kids adjust to a new partner or a new partner's kids.

New relationships, blended families, and remarriages are among the hardest parts of the divorce process. A new, blended family can add more stress at first, and lead to another period of adjustment. Keep lines of communication open, allow one-on-one time for parents and kids, and watch for signs of stress to help prevent problems.

Getting Help

Figure out how to reduce stress in your life to help your family.

Support from friends, relatives, church and religious groups, and organizations such as Parents Without Partners can help parents and their kids adjust to separation and divorce. Kids can meet peers who've successfully navigated their parents' divorce, new partners, and new family dynamics and can confide in each other. Getting support can help parents find solutions to all kinds of practical and emotional challenges.

Parents also need to remember to take care of themselves. Reduce stress by finding supportive friends and asking for help when you need it. Try to keep some old family traditions while building new memories to share. Showing your kids how to take good care of mind and body during hard times can help them become more resilient in their own lives.

Remember that honesty, sensitivity, self-awareness, and time itself will help the healing process.

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