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Helping Children Understand Divorce

When parents decide to divorce, they typically have been through a series of events that have led them to this decision. Whether or not children are aware of parents' decisions depends on many things, including parents' behaviors and children's experiences. In some families, husbands and wives may argue frequently in front of the children, leaving children to suspect that something is going on. In other families, parents may talk quietly about their differences without the children ever knowing. And in other families, parents may argue sometimes and quietly handle their differences at other times. Regardless of the type of adult arguments and interactions that children experience, when parents decide to divorce, children need to know.

The purpose of this guide is to help you understand the thoughts and feelings that children may have when their parents decide to divorce and to provide some tips for talking with children about divorce.

Talking with children about divorce

Children's reactions to parental divorce are related to how parents inform them of their decision. Because of this, it is important for parents to think carefully about how they will tell their children and what they will tell them. When possible, the entire family should meet together so that both parents can answer children's questions. This strategy may also help parents to avoid blaming each other for the divorce. The following tips might make this a smoother process:

- Set aside time to meet as a family
- Plan ahead of time what to tell children
- Stay calm
- Plan to meet again

What to tell children

Remember that divorce is confusing for children. When you first talk with children, limit your discussion to the most important and most immediate issues; children can become confused if they are given too much information at once. Children need to hear that their basic needs will be met, that someone will still fix breakfast in the morning, help them with their homework, and tuck them into bed at night. Children also need to know that their relationship with BOTH parents will continue, if possible. In the face of so many changes, children also need to hear what will remain the same. Parents can reassure their children through words and actions that their love will continue despite the changes in routine family life.

During these family discussions, it is important for parents to tell children that the divorce is final and avoid giving children false hopes that the parents will reunite. Parents can also use this time to tell children that the divorce is not their fault. Many children believe that the divorce is a result of something that they did. Even

younger children who seem to have no understanding of what is going on may need extra reassurance during this time. For instance, when asked why parents divorce, some children may explain that parents are divorcing because the children misbehaved or received bad grades in school. Children need repeated reassurance from parents that they are not responsible for the divorce.

Remember to ask children about their fears and concerns. Give children time to think about the divorce and the changes ahead. Meet again as a family to talk about new questions and to reassure children of your ongoing involvement in their lives.

Take your children's questions and concerns seriously and LISTEN to what they say. As stated by one child, "this is gonna affect the rest of my life and I don't know if they just don't realize that, or don't care, or what, but I don't feel like I'm being heard."

Children need to know that parents recognize the impact of divorce on children's lives. By listening to children's thoughts and feelings about the divorce, parents demonstrate their ongoing care and concern.

Realize that feelings of loss and anger are typical. You can't change your child's feelings, but it is important to let your child know you understand them. For example, "I know you must be really sad that you can't see your dad today."

What I need from my mom and dad

- I need both of you to stay involved in my life. Even if you don't live close by, please write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions about who I spend time with and what I like and don't like to do. When you don't stay involved in my life, I feel like I'm not important and that you don't really love me.
- Please stop fighting and work hard to get along with each other. Try to agree on matters related to me and my needs. When you fight about me, I think that I did something wrong and I feel guilty.
- I want to love you both and enjoy the time that I spend with each of you. Please support me and the time that I spend with each of you. If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides and love one parent more than the other.
- Please communicate directly with my other parent so that I don't have to send messages back and forth. I want you to talk with each other so that the messages are communicated the right way and so that I don't feel like I am going to mess up.
- When talking about my other parent, please say only nice things, or don't say anything at all. When you say mean, unkind things about my other parent, I feel like you are putting me down and expecting me to take your side.
- Please remember that I want both of you to be a part of my life. I count on my mom and dad to raise me, to teach me what is important, and to help me when I have problems.

Sibling relationships in divorced families

When parents divorce, brothers and sisters may begin to interact differently. While some siblings become closer at this time, others may argue more and become emotionally distant. It is difficult to predict how children will respond in any particular family.

The emotional stress that parents feel following divorce may temporarily reduce the amount of attention they are able to give their children. As a result, some children turn to one another for nurturance and support. Because

siblings experience many of the same emotions, they are able to understand each other's feelings and concerns and to reassure each other. Other children, however, may engage in more conflict with their siblings. These children may feel confused and angry about the changes that are occurring in their family and they take these negative feelings out on their siblings. Some siblings also engage in more conflict because they are competing for their parents' attention.

Parents may be able to reduce their children's rivalry by talking with them, listening to them, and spending some time alone with each child. Parents also need to realize that younger siblings may have an easier time expressing their confusion than their older siblings.

Therefore, parents should be sure to talk to the older siblings even if they do not seem upset. It is also important for parents to encourage children to continue rituals that were established before the divorce so they will have some feelings of continuity and stability.

Children's understanding of divorce by age group

Children's understanding of parental divorce depends on their developmental stage. It is important for parents to know what thoughts and feelings children of different ages may be having so that they can modify their own behaviors to help children adjust to the divorce.

Infants

Understandings

- Infants notice changes in parents' energy level and emotional state.
- Older infants notice when one parent is no longer living in the home.

Feelings

- More irritability, such as crying and fussing.
- Changes in sleeping, napping and other daily routines.

What parents can do for infants

- Keep normal schedules and routines.
- Reassure infants of your continued presence with physical affection and loving words.
- Keep children's favorite toys, blankets or stuffed animals close at hand.

Toddlers

Understandings

- Recognize that one parent no longer lives at home.
- May express empathy toward others, such as a parent who is feeling sad.

Feelings

- May have difficulty separating from parents.
- May express anger toward parent.
- May lose some of the skills they have developed, like toilet training.

- Toddlers may show some of the behaviors that they outgrew, such as thumbsucking.
- Sleeping and naptime routines may change.
- Older toddlers may have nightmares.

What parents can do for toddlers

- Spend more time with children when preparing to separate (e.g., arrive 10 to 15 minutes earlier than usual when you take your child to child care).
- Provide physical and verbal reassurance of your love.
- Show understanding of child's distress; recognize that, given time and support, old behaviors (thumbsucking) will disappear and newly developed skills (toilet training) will reappear.
- Talk with other important adults and caregivers about how to support your child during this transition time.

Preschool and early elementary children

Understandings

- Preschoolers recognize that one parent no longer lives at home.
- Elementary school children begin to understand that divorce means their parents will no longer be married and live together, and that their parents no longer love each other.

Feelings

- Will likely blame themselves for the divorce.
- May worry about the changes in their daily lives.
- Have more nightmares.
- May exhibit signs of sadness and grieving because of the absence of one parent.
- Preschoolers may be aggressive and angry toward the parent they blame.
- Because preschoolers struggle with the difference between fantasy and reality, children may have rich fantasies about parents getting back together.

What parents can do for preschool and early elementary children

- Repeatedly tell children that they are not responsible for the divorce.
- Reassure children of how their needs will be met and of who will take care of them.
- Talk with children about their thoughts and feelings; be sensitive to children's fears.
- Plan a schedule of time for children to spend with their other parent. Be supportive of children's ongoing relationship with the other parent.
- Read books together about children and divorce ([see list](#)).
- Gently, and matter-of-factly, remind children that the divorce is final and that parents will not get back together again.

Preteens and adolescents

Understandings

- Understand what divorce means but may have difficulty accepting the reality of the changes it brings to their family.
- Although thinking at a more complex level, still may blame themselves for the divorce.

Feelings

- May feel abandoned by the parent who moves out of the house.
- May withdraw from long-time friends and favorite activities.
- May act out in uncharacteristic ways (start using bad language, become aggressive or rebellious).
- May feel angry and unsure about their own beliefs concerning love, marriage, and family.
- May experience a sense of growing up too soon.
- May start to worry about adult matters, such as the family's financial security.
- May feel obligated to take on more adult responsibilities in the family.

What parents can do for preteens and adolescents

- Maintain open lines of communication with children; reassure children of your love and continued involvement in their lives.
- Whenever possible, both parents need to stay involved in children's lives, know children's friends, what they do together, and keep up with children's progress at school and in other activities.
- Honor family rituals and routines (Sunday dinner, weeknight homework time, grocery shopping together, watching favorite television shows or movies as a family).
- If you need to increase children's household responsibilities, assign chores and tasks that are age-appropriate (help with laundry, housecleaning, yardwork, meal preparations); show appreciation for children's contributions.
- Avoid using teenagers as confidants; plan special time for yourself with adult friends and family members.
- Tell children who will be attending special occasions such as sporting events and graduation ceremonies, especially if you plan to take a new romantic partner.

Using books to talk with children about divorce

Children's books about divorce can help them work through the issues they face. Reading books can give children a way to express their emotions and discuss issues that they may not otherwise be comfortable talking about. These books may also help parents understand children's experiences of divorce.

- *It's not your fault, KoKo Bear*. Vicky Lansky (1998). Book Peddlers. This book is designed for parents and children ages 3 to 5 years to read together. Each page provides a large picture to show what is happening in the story and includes messages for parents. The messages for parents help make a connection between the story and what happens to children in real families. KoKo Bear faces situations that help him learn what divorce means, and that he is not to blame for the divorce. He is helped to talk about his feelings, and is told that he is still loved by both parents.
- *Dinosaurs Divorce: A guide for changing families*. Laurene Krasney Brown and Marc Brown (1986). Little Brown and Company. This award-winning book is designed for parents and young school-aged children to read together. Stories are presented in a cartoon strip pattern and organized around topics that are important for children experiencing the divorce of their parents. Issues such as why parents divorce,

living with one parent, having two homes, telling friends, parents' new partners, and celebrating special occasions are discussed. Solutions to problems that may come up are illustrated by the actions of the dinosaur children and their parents.

- *How do I feel about: My parents' Divorce*. Julia Cole (1997). Copper Beach Books. This book is written for older school-aged children with some reading skills, but should be read at least the first time with a parent so that the child may ask questions. Topics covered in the book include: why divorce happens, difficult feelings, and feeling okay. Photographs and cartoon illustrations show that everyone lives in a unique situation. The book reassures children that they are not alone in having their parents divorce and that there is more than one way that problems may be solved.
- *Pre-Teen Pressures: Divorce*. Debra Goldentyer (1998). Steck-Vaughn Company. This book, written for pre-teen readers, covers a wide range of issues. It is recommended that parents read it before reading it with their children. This book discusses common changes that take place for divorcing families. A variety of families are presented to show that there are many reasons why marriages end (affairs, violence/abuse and alcoholism). A variety of family stories are used to show that individuals adjust differently, make different decisions and move on to new relationships at different speeds. The children's roles in their own adjustment to divorce are emphasized.

For parents

- *Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust*. Nicholas Long and Rex Forehand (2002). Contemporary Books. This book provides practical, effective advice for parents on dealing with issues including talking to children about divorce, managing stress, communicating with the child's other parent, single parenting, and building a support network. It is clearly written and organized so that parents can quickly find information about specific issues.

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