

Divorce and Children

Written by Joy Venhorst
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Children's Adjustment

Divorce and events related to divorce, including marital conflict and separation, are almost always very stressful events in the life of a child. In the months after the separation, most children will show signs of one or more of the following: anxiety, sadness, anger, aggression, un-cooperative behavior, not sleeping well, and disrupted concentration at school. The length of this initial period of distress varies from child to child. For most children, the distress is short-term, and they learn to adapt with reasonable success.

What Parents Can Do

Whatever the family structure, children will still need a loving, nurturing, stable, economically secure environment for their optimal growth and development. The following are ways parents can provide this environment.

Decrease Conflict

Because conflict between parents after divorce makes adjustment more difficult for children, work on ways to decrease conflict and keep children out of it. Children need custody and access arrangements that minimize the potential for ongoing conflict between parents.

Provide a Good Relationship

A good parent-child relationship is the best predictor of good outcomes in children. If you are the parent who has moved out, make sure to stay in consistent contact with your children. You do not always have to plan fun activities when you are with your children—just spending time with them can be enough.

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Provide Stability

Providing routines and consistency for children helps them feel more secure. If they have to go through a lot of changes, such as a new home or school, try to establish new routines quickly.

Be Loving

Let your children know that you love them. Their reactions to divorce may lead to changes in behavior or mis-behavior. They need to know that you still love them, even though you may not approve of their behavior. Preschool-ers may blame themselves for the divorce. For example, they may think, "Daddy left because I was bad."

Take Time to Talk

Children need to know that their feelings and concerns are taken seriously. Parents need to let children express how they are feeling and what is going on in their thoughts. Listen without cutting them off with statements like, "Don't feel sad," or, "You shouldn't be mad." Acknowledge their feelings and discuss appropriate ways to deal with them.

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