Parenting on Your Own : Helping Children Adjust

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HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST

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"I think her questions have to be answered even if she doesn't always understand the answer. I want her to be able to ask, and not be afraid to ask questions. It's got to be open and honest."

The disruption of the family due to divorce poses a significant challenge to the children. Children can successfully adjust to divorce. Divorce can be so devastating to us as parents that we sometimes fail to realize how stressful this experience is for the children. Children may fear the loss of one or both parents. If the parent is deeply depressed, the children may feel completely isolated. The children are struggling just as hard as you are in dealing with these events, and in most cases they are less well prepared to handle the situation.

Openness When Dealing With Divorce

Parents may have a strong desire to protect their children from the sorrow and bitterness of a separation or divorce. In doing so, they may try to hide what is happening from the children. When these attempts at protection create an unreal world for the child, this may cause more harm than good. If there are going to be major changes in the child's world when one parent leaves or the family moves, this needs to be explained.

Changes that take place as a surprise or without explanation can leave the child confused and uncertain about what will happen in the future. If the child feels he or she has been deliberately misled or lied to, it will be difficult to maintain or rebuild the trust. Discussing the situation will be painful for both you and the children, but in the long run it will strengthen your relationship and open the door for future discussions. You will want to open these lines of communication as much as possible.

By explaining the situation to children and answering their questions, parents can help them begin to understand what is happening. In explaining separation or divorce it is not necessary to go into all of the intimate reasons and details of the decision. Rather, some general information can be offered about why the parents will no longer be living together. Your explanations to children will probably differ, depending on their ages. Older children will be better able to understand than younger children. The most important point is that children find out what the future holds for them and their relationship with both parents.
Preparing Children for Separation

Even if your separation or divorce has already taken place, the following suggestions still apply as a first step in helping children to adjust. If at all possible, it is helpful for both parents to talk with the children about the separation and divorce. This allows the children to ask questions of and hear answers from both parents, and helps them understand that both of you will continue to be their parents, even if you are no longer married to each other. You can encourage the children to ask questions. It is better for children to ask questions and try to understand what is happening than to keep everything inside. Although it may be painful for parents to answer these questions, seeing mom's and dad's reactions and emotions can help children to deal with their own painful emotions.

As a part of this initial conversation, you can tell children what changes will occur in their lives. It is important to let them know what specific changes will happen. Where will they live? Will they change schools or child care? Will they continue to visit the same relatives and friends? Even more important is an explanation of the contact they will have with each of you. What will the visitation schedule be? What about telephone calls? Last, but most important, both parents can reassure the children of their continued love.

While all of the questions and concerns cannot be answered initially, this early discussion clears the way for further conversations in the future. If these matters have not been discussed with the children before the separation or divorce, this discussion is still an important step in helping children adjust.

Is Adjustment Different in Joint Custody Arrangements?

While courts are increasingly granting joint custody to parents, we still know very little about how children may be affected. At present, we know that most children adjust more easily when both parents stay involved with the child's everyday life. What we don't know is whether the path of coping with the divorce is different for these children.

At first, it seems that children in a joint custody arrangement would have to adjust to a less disruptive situation. If both parents continue to care and provide guidance, then perhaps only the houses and arrangements have changed. Some psychologists, however, have argued that joint custody can create an unreal set of relationships. The child is less likely to come to terms with the divorce and may maintain more fantasies about the parents getting back together.

As a parent with joint custody, you may need to be clearer about the finality of the divorce. You will probably want to discourage efforts by the children to get you back together.

Most children feel some anger at their parents for disrupting the family. The children must eventually come to terms with this anger. Youngsters in joint custody may have more trouble expressing this anger and pain for fear of driving one or the other parent away. As a parent, you can try to acknowledge and accept these angry feelings and try to help children understand that the goal of joint custody is for their continued strong relationships with both parents.

Also, it is important that the pattern of shared parenting provide the child with continuity and closeness. It is equally important to avoid a situation where the child is a visitor in two households, yet really belongs in neither. Shared parenting seeks to maintain the active parenting roles of both parents and this will contribute to the child's adjustment. While joint custody requires some special adjustments on everyone's part, it can be handled in a way so that children can make healthy adjustments and maintain close ties with both parents.
"Every night at bedtime I say I love him, and he says he loves me. Then I say, 'You're a good boy' or 'the best little boy in the world'. I am always building up his confidence. And it works. He's a pretty confident little boy."

**Children's Adjustments to Divorce**

Children experience many of the same feelings as the parents in regard to the breakup of the marriage. They may feel sad, lonely, angry, hurt, embarrassed, and guilty. By being aware of your children's feelings, you can help them understand and deal with these emotions. Adjustment will take time for both you and your children. Begin with today's feelings and events and strive to create some stability in all of your lives.

Judy Wallerstein, who studied many children from divorced families, says that the child's first task is to realize that the marriage has ended. Even as parents, we may pretend that the divorce is really not occurring. Children may act or talk as if the parents will get back together. Most children have a hard time understanding what is happening and fear abandonment by both parents. Reassure your children that they will be safe, and explain to them about where and when they will see both parents. Having a schedule of visits will help ease this transition. It is important that this schedule be adhered to, or the youngsters may begin to doubt the parents' loyalty and love. Children need to know that they will continue to be loved and cared for.

Next, children need to turn their attention to school, friends, and other activities. Some children seem to lose interest in school, friends, and hobbies after a divorce, and they should be encouraged to develop or reestablish outside interests as soon as possible. Often the divorce focuses the child's attention on the events of the household. The child's feelings of sadness or anxiety may make it hard to concentrate and participate enthusiastically. But when parents, teachers, and others are encouraging and supportive, children are better able to return to pleasurable activities and schoolwork. By recognizing your children's feelings of sadness or anxiety, you can help them deal with these emotions. Trying to understand a child's unhappiness may not make the unhappiness go away, but pretending that the child is not sad may discourage him or her from expressing feelings. Sometimes just sharing these feelings can be a relief.
"I think the best thing I did was to try and talk to my kids and see what they were feeling. I would try to check out what they were feeling to see if that's what was going on."

The child also must deal with loss and feelings of rejection. Many times the child feels rejected by the departing parent. The child may think that if the parent who left really loved me, he or she would have stayed at home. Children may even feel that they are not worthy of being loved. It is hard for the young child not to view the departure as a rejection. While it may take some time, children can begin to appreciate that the divorce does not mean they themselves are being rejected. It is easiest for children if both parents continue to be involved in their care, to at least some degree. Continued parental involvement in the children’s day-to-day lives is the clearest statement that each parent’s love and affection will continue.

When both parents do not live in the same town, maintaining relationships may pose more problems. Many parents and children find letters and phone calls to be very important. Also, it is possible to exchange tape recorded messages or songs. Parents may follow their child’s interests by keeping track of sports or TV shows that the child is involved with. In this way the parent can share many of the same interests. By sending papers and artwork from school, children can share their accomplishments with both parents, and can have the feeling that both parents are involved in school.

Children may also make adjustments through the support and assistance of adults outside the family. The involvement and concern of others — such as teachers, neighbors, and family friends — seems to reassure the child that he or she is important and worthy of attention. In helping children deal with feelings of rejection, you can remind them that there are many people who care for and about them.

Many children also experience intense anger at one or both parents. Another task for these children is to resolve this anger and forgive their parents. This anger may be expressed directly toward the parents through hostility or aggressive behavior. Or it may appear indirectly through attacks on brothers and sisters or through mischievous behavior. Children may feel that the end of the parents’ marital commitment also signals an end to their commitment as parents.

Most children resolve their angry feelings as they develop a closer relationship with one parent following the divorce. Gradually, they may come to understand that the divorce was a good thing for the parent even if it did not seem like a good thing for the child. As a parent, you can try to understand and accept the child’s angry feelings. Children can be encouraged to express their anger and find appropriate ways to manage it. For many children, exercise or physical activity may be a useful outlet for these feelings.

Research studies indicate that children from divorced families do adjust and that there are few differences that last into adulthood. It seems to take about two years for many of these adjustments to be completed, but by providing the best care for your children, you can help them to grow up healthy and happy. Over several years, your children will continue to adjust to the idea that the family will not get back together and will develop a realistic hope about their ability to maintain close relationships.
Groups for Children From Divorced Families

Some schools and communities offer programs for children whose parents have recently been divorced. Often these groups are led by a counselor who has had specific training in working with these children. Just as parents seek support from friends and relatives, children can find comfort in their peers. Informal support groups give children the opportunity to learn how to deal with their feelings and see how others are coping. This group experience may help a child feel less alone and better able to manage this situation. If there is a support group for children in your community, you may want to inquire about it and discuss this with your child. If no group exists, you may want to talk with school personnel or mental health workers to see about starting such a group.

Yes, You Can

Children can adjust to divorce. And you as a parent can find ways to help children understand the situation and deal with their feelings of sadness, fear, embarrassment, and anger. This is not an easy time for you and your children, but many other families have found ways to cope — and so can you.

For Further Reading


For Kids

This circular was prepared by Robert Hughes, Jr., Assistant Professor of Family Relations Extension. Acknowledgment is also given to the parents and children who enthusiastically shared their experiences through photographs and personal responses.

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