

Children and Divorce

Helping your kids cope with the effects of separation and divorce



For children, divorce can be stressful, sad, and confusing. At any age, kids may feel uncertain about what life will be like, or angry at the prospect of mom and dad splitting up for good. Divorce isn't easy, but as a parent you can make the process and its effects less painful for your children.

Helping your kids cope with your divorce means providing stability in your home and attending to your children's physical and emotional needs with a reassuring, positive attitude. To make this happen, you'll need to take care of yourself—and work as peacefully as possible with your ex. It won't be a seamless process, but your children can move forward feeling confident in your unconditional love.

In This Article:

- [Supporting your child](#)
- [What to tell your kids](#)
- [Listen and offer reassurance](#)
- [Provide stability and structure](#)
- [Take care of yourself](#)
- [Work with your ex](#)
- [Know when to seek help](#)
- [Related articles & resources](#)

A parent's guide to supporting your child through a divorce

As a parent, it's normal to feel uncertain about how to give your children the right support through your divorce or separation. It may be uncharted territory, but you *can* successfully navigate this unsettling time—and help your kids emerge from it feeling loved, confident, and strong.

There are many ways you can help your kids adjust to separation or divorce. Your patience, reassurance, and listening ear can minimize tension as children learn to cope with new circumstances. By providing routines kids can rely on, you remind children they can count on you for stability, structure, and care. And if you can maintain a working relationship with your ex, you can help kids avoid the stress that comes with watching parents in conflict. Such a transitional time can't be without some measure of hardship, but you can powerfully reduce your children's pain by making their well-being your top priority.

What I need from my mom and dad: A child's list of wants

- I need both of you to stay involved in my life. Please write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions. When you don't stay involved, 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. 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.
- 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 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.

Source: *University of Missouri*

Helping children cope with divorce: What to tell your kids

When it comes to telling your kids about your divorce, many parents freeze up. Make the conversation a little easier on both yourself and your children by preparing significantly before you sit down to talk. If you can anticipate tough questions, deal with your own anxieties ahead of time, and plan carefully what you'll be telling them, you will be better equipped to help your children handle the news.

What to say and how to say it

Difficult as it may be to do, try to strike an empathetic tone and address the most important points right up front. Give your children the benefit of an honest—but kid-friendly—explanation.

- **Tell the truth.** Your kids are entitled to know why you are getting a divorce, but long-winded reasons may only confuse them. Pick something simple and honest, like “We can't get along anymore.” You may need to remind your children that while sometimes

parents and kids don't always get along, parents and kids don't stop loving each other or get divorced from each other.

- **Say “I love you.”** However simple it may sound, letting your children know that your love for them hasn't changed is a powerful message. Tell them you'll still be caring for them in every way, from fixing their breakfast to helping with homework.
- **Address changes.** Preempt your kids' questions about changes in their lives by acknowledging that some things will be different now, and other things won't. Let them know that together you can deal with each detail as you go.

Avoid blaming

It's vital to be honest with your kids, but without being critical of your spouse. This can be especially difficult when there have been hurtful events, such as infidelity, but with a little diplomacy, you can avoid playing the blame game.

- **Present a united front.** As much as you can, try to agree in advance on an explanation for your separation or divorce—and stick to it.
- **Plan your conversations.** Make plans to talk with your children before any changes in the living arrangements occur. And plan to talk when your spouse is present, if possible.
- **Show restraint.** Be respectful of your spouse when giving the reasons for the separation.

How much information to give

Especially at the beginning of your separation or divorce, you'll need to pick and choose how much to tell your children. Think carefully about how certain information will affect them.

- **Be age-aware.** In general, younger children need less detail and will do better with a simple explanation, while older kids may need more information.
- **Share logistical information.** Do tell kids about changes in their living arrangements, school, or activities, but don't overwhelm them with the details.
- **Keep it real.** No matter how much or how little you decide to tell your kids, remember that the information should be truthful above all else.

Helping children cope with divorce: Listen and reassure

Support your children by helping them express emotions, and commit to truly listening to these feelings without getting defensive. Your next job is reassurance—assuaging fears, straightening misunderstandings, and showing your unconditional love. The bottom line: kids need to know that your divorce isn't their fault.

Help kids express feelings

For kids, divorce can feel like loss: the loss of a parent, the loss of the life they know. You can help your children grieve and adjust to new circumstances by supporting their feelings.

- **Listen.** Encourage your child to share their feelings and really *listen* to them. They may be feeling sadness, loss or frustration about things you may not have expected.
- **Help them find words for their feelings.** It's normal for children to have difficulty expressing their feelings. You can help them by noticing their moods and encouraging them to talk.
- **Let them be honest.** Children might be reluctant to share their true feelings for fear of hurting you. Let them know that whatever they say is okay. If they aren't able to share their honest feelings, they will have a harder time working through them.
- **Acknowledge their feelings.** You may not be able to fix their problems or change their sadness to happiness, but it is important for you to acknowledge their feelings rather than dismissing them. You can also inspire trust by showing that you understand.

Clearing up misunderstandings

Many kids believe that they had something to do with the divorce, recalling times they argued with their parents, received poor grades, or got in trouble. You can help your kids let go of this misconception.

- **Set the record straight.** Repeat why you decided to get a divorce. Sometimes hearing the real reason for your decision can help.
- **Be patient.** Kids may seem to “get it” one day and be unsure the next. Treat your child's confusion or misunderstandings with patience.
- **Reassure.** As often as you need to, remind your children that both parents will continue to love them and that they are not responsible for the divorce.

Give reassurance and love

Children have a remarkable ability to heal when given the support and love they need. Your words, actions, and ability to remain consistent are all important tools to reassure your children of your unchanging love.

- **Both parents will be there.** Let your kids know that even though the physical circumstances of the family unit will change, they can continue to have healthy, loving relationships with both of their parents.
- **It'll be okay.** Tell kids that things won't always be easy, but that they will work out. Knowing it'll be all right can provide incentive for your kids to give a new situation a chance.
- **Closeness.** Physical closeness—in the form of hugs, pats on the shoulder, or simple proximity—has a powerful way of reassuring your child of your love.
- **Be honest.** When kids raise concerns or anxieties, respond truthfully. If you don't know the answer, say gently that you aren't sure right now, but you'll find out and it will be okay.

Helping children cope with divorce: Provide stability and structure



While it's good for kids to learn to be flexible, adjusting to many new things at once can be very difficult. Help your kids adjust to change by providing as much stability and structure as possible in their daily lives.

Remember that establishing structure and continuity doesn't mean that you need rigid schedules or that mom and dad's routines need to be exactly the same. But creating some regular routines at each household and consistently communicating to your children what to expect will provide your kids with a sense of calm and stability.

The comfort of routines

The benefit of schedules and organization for younger children is widely recognized, but many people don't realize that older children appreciate routine, as well. Kids feel safer and more secure when they know what to expect next. Knowing that, even when they switch homes, dinnertime is followed by a bath and then homework, for example, can set a child's mind at ease.

Maintaining routine also means continuing to observe rules, rewards, and discipline with your children. Resist the temptation to spoil kids during a divorce by not enforcing limits or allowing them to break rules.

Helping children cope with divorce: Take care of yourself



[Need More Help with Divorce?](#)

Helpguide's *Bring Your Life into Balance* mindfulness toolkit can help.

The first safety instruction for an airplane emergency is to put the oxygen mask on yourself before you put it on your child. The take-home message: take care of yourself so that you can be there for your kids.

Your own recovery

If you are able to be calm and emotionally present, your kids will feel more at ease. The following are steps you can take toward improving your own well-being and outlook:

- **Exercise often and eat a healthy diet.** Exercise relieves the pent-up stress and frustration that are commonplace with divorce. And although cooking for one can be difficult, eating healthfully will make you feel better, inside and out—so skip the fast food.

- **See friends often.** It may be tempting to hole up and not see friends and family who will inevitably ask about the divorce—but the reality is that you need the distraction. Ask friends to avoid the topic; they'll understand.
- **Keep a journal.** Writing down your feelings, thoughts, and moods can help you release tension, sadness, and anger. As time passes, you can look back on just how far you've come.

You'll need support

At the very least, divorce is complicated and stressful—and can be devastating without support.

- **Lean on friends.** Talk to friends or a support group about your bitterness, anger, frustration—whatever the feeling may be—so you don't take it out on your kids.
- **Never vent negative feelings to your child.** Whatever you do, do not use your child to talk it out like you would with a friend.
- **Keep laughing.** Try to inject humor and play into your life and the lives of your children as much as you can; it can relieve stress and give you all a break from sadness and anger.
- **See a therapist.** If you are feeling intense anger, fear, grief, shame, or guilt, find a professional to help you work through those feelings.

Helping children cope with divorce: Work with your ex

Conflict between parents—separated or not—can be very damaging for kids. It's crucial to avoid putting your children in the middle of your fights, or making them feel like they have to choose between you.

Rules of thumb

Remember that your goal is to avoid lasting stress and pain for your children. The following tips can save them a lot of heartache.

- **Take it somewhere else.** Never argue in front of your children, whether it's in person or over the phone. Ask your ex to talk another time, or drop the conversation altogether.
- **Use tact.** Refrain from talking with your children about details of their other parent's behavior. It's the oldest rule in the book: if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.
- **Be nice.** Be polite in your interactions with your ex-spouse. This not only sets a good example for your kids but can also cause your ex to be gracious in response.
- **Look on the bright side.** Choose to focus on the strengths of all family members. Encourage children to do the same.
- **Work on it.** Make it a priority to develop an amicable relationship with your ex-spouse as soon as possible. Watching you be friendly can reassure children and teach problem-solving skills as well.

The big picture

If you find yourself, time after time, locked in battle with your ex over the details of parenting, try to step back and remember the bigger purpose at hand.

- **Relationship with both parents.** What's best for your kids in the long run? Having a good relationship with *both* of their parents throughout their lives.
- **The long view.** If you can keep long-term goals—your children's physical and mental health, your independence—in mind, you may be able to avoid disagreements about daily details. Think ahead in order to stay calm.
- **Everyone's well-being.** The happiness of your children, yourself, and, yes, even your ex, should be the broad brushstrokes in the big picture of your new lives after divorce.

Helping children cope with divorce: Know when to seek help

Some children go through divorce with relatively few problems, while others have a very difficult time. It's normal for kids to feel a range of difficult emotions, but time, love, and reassurance should help them to heal. If your kids remain overwhelmed, though, you may need to seek professional help.

Normal reactions to separation and divorce

Although strong feelings can be tough on kids, the following reactions can be considered normal for children.

- **Anger.** Your kids may express their anger, rage, and resentment with you and your spouse for destroying their sense of normalcy.
- **Anxiety.** It's natural for children to feel anxious when faced with big changes in their lives.
- **Mild depression.** Sadness about the family's new situation is normal, and sadness coupled with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness is likely to become a mild form of depression.

It will take some time for your kids to work through their issues about the separation or divorce, but you should see gradual improvement over time.

Red flags for more serious problems

If things get worse rather than better after several months, it may be a sign that your child is stuck in depression, anxiety, or anger and could use some additional support. Watch for these warning signs of divorce-related depression or anxiety:

- Sleep problems
- Poor concentration
- Trouble at school
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Self-injury, cutting, or eating disorders
- Frequent angry or violent outbursts
- Withdrawal from loved ones
- Refusal of loved activities

Discuss these or other divorce-related warning-signs with your child's doctor, teachers, or consult a child therapist for guidance on coping with specific problems.

Thousands of kids experience the stress of divorce each year. How they'll react depends on their age, personality, and the particular circumstances of the separation and divorce process.

Every divorce will have an effect on the kids involved — and many times the initial reaction is one of shock, sadness, frustration, anger, or worry. But kids can also come out of it better able to cope with stress, and many become more flexible, tolerant young adults.

The most important things that both parents can do to help kids through this difficult time are:

- Keep visible conflict, heated discussions, and legal talk away from the kids.

- Minimize the disruptions to kids' daily routines.

- Confine negativity and blame about each other to private therapy sessions or conversations with friends outside the home.

- Keep each parent involved in the kids' lives.

Most adults going through separation and divorce need support — from friends, professionals, clergy, and family. Don't seek support from your kids, even if they seem to want you to.

Breaking the News

As soon as you're certain of your plans, talk to your kids about your decision to live apart. Although there's no easy way to break the news, if possible have both parents present for this conversation. It's important to try to leave feelings of anger, guilt, or blame out of it. Practice how you're going to manage telling your kids so you don't become upset or angry during the talk.

Although the discussion about divorce should be tailored to a child's age, maturity, and temperament, be sure to convey one basic message: What happened is between mom and dad and is not the kids' fault. Most kids will feel they are to blame even after parents have said that they are not. So it's vital for parents to keep providing this reassurance.

Tell your kids that sometimes adults change the way they love each other or can't agree on things and so they have to live apart. But remind them that kids and parents are tied together for life, by

birth or adoption. Parents and kids often don't agree on things, but that is part of the circle of life — parents and kids don't stop loving each other or get divorced from each other.

Give kids enough information to prepare them for the upcoming changes in their lives. Try to answer their questions as truthfully as possible. Remember that kids don't need to know all the reasons behind a divorce (especially if it involves blaming the other parent). It's enough for them just to understand what will change in their daily routine, and — just as important — what will not.

With younger kids, it's best to keep it simple. You might say something like: "Mom and dad are going to live in different houses so they don't fight so much, but we both love you very much."

Older kids and teens may be more in tune with what parents have been going through, and may have more questions based on what they've overheard and picked up on from conversations and fights.

Handling Kids' Reactions

Tell kids who are upset about the news that you recognize and care about their feelings and reassure them that all of their upset feelings are perfectly OK and understandable. You might say: "I know this is very upsetting for you. Can we try to think of something that would make you feel better?" or "We both love you and are sorry that we have to live apart."

Not all kids react right away. Let yours know that's OK too, and there will be other times to talk when they're ready. Some kids try to please their parents by acting as if everything is fine, or try to avoid any difficult feelings by denying that they feel any anger or sadness at the news. Sometimes stress comes out in other ways — at school, or with friends, or in changes to their appetite, behavior or sleep patterns.

Whether your kids express fear, worry, or relief about your separation and divorce, they'll want to know how their own day-to-day lives might change.

Be prepared to answer these and other questions:

Who will I live with?

Where will I go to school?

Will I move?

Where will each parent live?

Where will we spend holidays such as Thanksgiving?

Will I still get to see my friends?

Will I have to go to a different school?

Can I still go to camp this summer?

Can I still do my favorite activities?

Being honest is not always easy when you don't have all the answers, or when kids are feeling scared or guilty about what's going on. It's always the right thing to do to tell them what they need to know at that moment.

Helping Kids Cope

Many kids — and parents — grieve the loss of the kind of family they had hoped for, and kids especially miss the presence of a parent and the family life they had. That's why it's common and very natural for some kids to hold out hope that their parents will someday get back together — even after the finality of divorce has been explained to them.

Mourning the loss of a family is normal, but over time both you and your kids will come to accept the new situation. So reassure them that it's OK to wish that mom and dad will reunite, but also explain the finality of your decisions.

Here are some ways to help kids cope with the upset of a divorce:

Encourage honesty. Kids need to know that their feelings are important to their parents and that they'll be taken seriously.

Help them put their feelings into words. Kids' behavior can often clue you in to their feelings of sadness or anger. You might say: "It seems as if you're feeling sad right now. Do you know what's making you feel so sad?" Be a good listener, even if it's difficult for you to hear what they have to say.

Legitimize their feelings. Saying "I know you feel sad now" or "I know it feels lonely without dad here" lets kids know that their feelings are valid. It's important to encourage kids to get it all out before you start offering ways to make it better. Let kids know it's also OK to feel happy or relieved or excited about the future.

Offer support. Ask, "What do you think will help you feel better?" They might not be able to name something, but you can suggest a few ideas — maybe just to sit together for a while, take a walk, or hold a favorite stuffed animal. Younger kids might especially appreciate an offer to call daddy on the phone or to make a picture to give to mommy when she comes at the end of the day.

Keep yourself healthy. For adults, separation and divorce is highly stressful. That pressure may be amplified by custody, property, and financial issues, which can bring out the worst in people.

Finding ways to manage your own stress is essential for you and your entire family. Keeping yourself as physically and emotionally healthy as possible can help combat the effects of stress, and by making sure you're taking care of your own needs, you can ensure that you'll be in the best possible shape to take care of your kids.

Keep the details in check. Take care to ensure privacy when discussing the details of the divorce with friends, family, or your lawyer. Try to keep your interactions with your ex as civil as possible, especially when you're interacting in front of the kids.

Take the high road — don't resort to blaming or name-calling within earshot of your kids, no matter what the circumstances of the separation. This is especially important in an "at fault" divorce where there have been especially hurtful events, like infidelity. Take care to keep letters, e-mails, and text messages in a secure location as kids will be naturally curious if there is a high-conflict situation going on at home.

Get help. This is not the time to go it alone. Find a support group, talk to others who have gone through this, use online resources, or ask your doctor or religious leaders to refer you to other resources. Getting help yourself sets a good example for your kids on how to make a healthy adjustment to this major change.

Help from a counselor, therapist, or friend will also maintain healthy boundaries with your kids. It's very important not to lean on your kids for support. Older kids and those who are eager to please may try to make you feel better by offering a shoulder to cry on. No matter how tempting that is, it's best not to let them be the provider of your emotional support. Let

your kids know how touched you are by their caring nature and kindness, but do your venting to a friend or therapist.

The Importance of Consistency

Consistency and routine can go a long way toward providing comfort and familiarity that can help your family during this major life change. When possible, minimize unpredictable schedules, transitions, or abrupt separations.

Especially during a divorce, kids will benefit from one-on-one time with each parent. No matter how inconvenient, try to accommodate your ex-partner as you figure out visitation schedules.

It's natural that you'll be concerned about how a child is coping with this change. The best thing that you can do is trust your instincts and rely on what you know about your kids. Do they seem to be acting differently than usual? Is a child doing things like regressing to younger behaviors, such as thumb-sucking or bedwetting? Do emotions seem to be getting in the way of everyday routines, like school and social life?

Behavioral changes are important to watch out for — any new or changing signs of moodiness; sadness; anxiety; school problems; or difficulties with friends, appetite, and sleep can be signs of a problem.

Older kids and teens may be vulnerable to risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, skipping school, and defiant acts. Regardless of whether such troubles are related to the divorce, they are serious problems that affect a teen's well-being and indicate the need for outside help.

Fighting in Front of the Kids

Although the occasional argument between parents is expected in any family, living in a battleground of continual hostility and unresolved conflict can place a heavy burden on a child. Screaming, fighting, arguing, or violence can make kids fearful and apprehensive.

Witnessing parental conflict presents an inappropriate model for kids, who are still learning how to deal with their own relationships. Kids whose parents maintain anger and hostility are much more likely to have continued emotional and behavioral difficulties that last beyond childhood.

Talking with a mediator or divorce counselor can help couples air their grievances and hurt to each other in a way that doesn't cause harm to their children. Though it may be difficult, working together in this way will spare kids the hurt caused by continued bitterness and anger.

Adjusting to a New Living Situation

Because divorce can be such a big change, adjustments in living arrangements should be handled gradually.

Several types of living situations should be considered:

- one parent may have sole custody
- joint custody in which both legal and physical custody are shared
- joint custody where one parent has "tie breaking" authority in certain medical or educational domains

Which one is right for your kids? That's a tough question and often the one that couples spend most time disagreeing on. Although some kids can thrive spending half their time with each parent, others seem to need the stability of having one "home" and visiting with the other parent. Some parents choose to both remain in the same home — but this only works in the rarest of circumstances and in general should be avoided.

Whatever arrangement you choose, your child's needs should come first. Avoid getting involved in a tug of war as a way to "win." When deciding how to handle holidays, birthdays, and vacations, stay focused on what's best for the kids. It's important for parents to resolve these issues themselves and not ask the kids to choose.

During the preteen years, when kids become more involved with activities apart from their parents, they may need different schedules to accommodate their changing priorities. Ideally, kids benefit most from consistent support from both parents, but they may resist equal time-sharing if it interrupts school or their social lives. Be prepared for their thoughts on time-sharing, and try to be flexible.

Your child may refuse to share time with you and your spouse equally and may try to take sides. If this occurs, as hard as it is, try not to take it personally. Maintain the visitation schedule and emphasize the importance of the involvement of both parents.

Kids sometimes propose spending an entire summer, semester, or school year with the noncustodial parent. But this may not reflect that they want to move. Listen to and explore these options if they're brought up. This kind of arrangement can work well in "friendly" divorces, but is not typical of higher-conflict situations.

Parenting Under Pressure

As far as is possible, both parents should work toward maximizing consistency in routine and discipline across both households. Similar expectations regarding bedtimes, rules, and homework will reduce anxiety, especially in younger children.

Wherever possible, work with the other parent to maintain consistent rules — and even when you can't enforce them in your ex-partner's home, you can stick to them in yours.

It's important to maintain as much normalcy as possible after a divorce by keeping regular routines, including mealtimes, house rules about behavior, and discipline. Relaxing limits, especially during a time of change, tends to make kids insecure and reduces your chances of regaining appropriate parental authority later.

Resist the urge to drop routines and spoil kids upset about a divorce by letting them break rules or not enforcing limits. You should feel free to lavish affection on them — kids don't get spoiled by too many hugs or comforting words. But buying things to replace love or allowing kids to act any way they want is not in their best interests, and you could struggle to reel them back in once the dust settles.

Divorce can be a major crisis for a family. However, if you and your former spouse can work together and communicate civilly for the benefit of your children, the original family unit can continue to be a source of strength, even if stepfamilies enter the picture.

So remember to:

Get help dealing with your own painful feelings about the divorce. If you're able to adjust, your kids will be more likely to do so, too.

Be patient with yourself and with your child. Emotional concerns, loss, and hurt following divorce take time to heal and this often happens in phases.

Recognize the signs of stress. Consult your kids' teachers, doctor, or a child therapist for guidance on how to handle specific problems you're concerned about.

Changes of any kind are hard — know that you and your kids can and will adjust to this one. Finding your inner strength and getting help to learn new coping skills are hard work, but can make a big difference to helping your family get through this difficult time.

Children and divorce: Helping kids after a breakup

Divorce is between adults — but the breakup of a marriage can have profound effects on children, too. Here's help presenting a united front to your child.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Divorce is stressful for the entire family. Your child might feel as if his or her world has turned upside down. But there's good news. You can ease your child's adjustment to the divorce by choosing to interact responsibly with your spouse. Consider these practical tips for children and divorce.

How to break the news

It's best if you and your spouse can tell your child about the divorce together. Speak honestly and simply, and skip the ugly details. You might say, "Your mom (or dad) and I have been having trouble getting along, so we think it's best for us to live apart."

Make sure your child understands that divorce is only between adults. Remind your child — repeatedly if necessary — that he or she did nothing to cause the divorce and that both of you love your child as much as ever.

Also tell your child's teacher and school counselor or social worker about the divorce. They can observe your child and keep you updated on any concerns.

Expect a mix of reactions

Initially, your child might be most interested in concrete things. Where will I live? Do I need to change schools? Who will take me to swimming lessons? As you work out the terms of the divorce, try to maintain your child's routine as much as possible — or be quick to establish a new routine. Knowing what to expect will help your child feel more secure.

But soon, the reality of divorce will settle in. A younger child might respond to the stress by regressing to behavior he or she had previously outgrown, such as sucking on a pacifier or wetting the bed. A resurgence of separation anxiety could strike as well. Help your child put his or her feelings into words.

An older child might respond to the stress with a mix of emotions — anger, anxiety, grief or even relief. If your child's anger turns inward, he or she might become depressed or withdrawn. Anger can have the opposite effect, too, causing a child to act out or develop behavior issues. Encourage your child to share his or her feelings as openly as possible.

Keep your child out of the fight

Respecting your child's relationship with the other parent can help your child adapt to the divorce. Keep these general "don'ts" in mind:

- Don't speak badly about your spouse in front of your child.

- Don't make accusations against your spouse in front of your child.
- Don't force your child to choose sides.
- Don't use your child as a messenger or go-between.
- Don't argue or discuss child support issues in front of your child.
- Don't pump your child for information about the other parent.
- Don't use your child as a pawn to hurt the other parent.

Children and divorce: Helping kids after a breakup

Don't bend the rules

It might be tempting to relax your parental rules while your child grieves the divorce, but this could lead to even more insecurity. Children thrive on consistency, structure and routine — even if they insist on testing the boundaries and limits. If your child shares time between two households, it's important to maintain similar rules in both homes.

Counseling can help

You might feel so hurt or overwhelmed by your divorce that you turn to your child for comfort and direction, but that's not your child's role. For help sorting through your feelings, consider joining a divorce support group or seeking counseling through a social service agency or mental health center. If you and your spouse need help reaching decisions about your child during or after the divorce, consider using the services of a family or divorce mediator.

Your child might also benefit from counseling, especially if he or she has significant behavioral issues, seems depressed or has trouble adjusting to the divorce after the first year.

Put your child first

During a divorce, interacting with your spouse might be the last thing you want to do — but it's important. Your child needs both of you. Work out custody arrangements and other details with your child's best interests in mind. This could mean putting your child's needs ahead of your own wishes or desires. Also, remember that a bitter or prolonged custody battle could take a serious, long-term toll on your child's mental health. Instead, help your child maintain a strong, loving relationship with the other parent as you work toward meeting common parenting goals. For your child, support from both parents may be the best tool for weathering the challenges of divorce.

Nothing about divorce, especially with kids, is easy. It helped when I could find the inner resources to roll up my mental sleeves and look just three feet ahead of me, rather than allowing my mind to roam around the whole big picture and all that needed to be done.

Make clear to the kids that the divorce is not about them.

All kinds of things go through kids' minds. Some think, *If only I had been better-behaved, mom and dad would still be together*, especially if they have ever heard you arguing about them. Look each of your children in the eye and let them know they could not have caused the divorce, nor could they have prevented it.

Let the kids know that you are not divorcing them.

Don't badmouth your ex.

I soon learned that even if I were to have said something like, "Your father raped a whole cheerleading squad," they would have responded, "Don't say anything bad about my dad."

Let the kids know you want them to have a good relationship with both parents.

Fortunately, I divorced someone who cared about the kids as much as I did. If he really had raped a whole cheerleading squad, it might have been a different story.

Let the kids know there is a zero possibility of your getting back together with the ex.

When my kids want something I don't agree with, they know I mean business when I say, "There is a zero possibility that we are going bungee-jumping." All three of my daughters are now in their twenties, and all have told me that they never had the "Parent Trap" fantasy that their dad and I would get back together. It helped that I knew for sure in my deepest core that we would never again be a couple.

Encourage children to express their feelings about the divorce.

Let the kids know it's natural to feel sad. You can set the example by not trying to force 24/7 cheer. On the other hand, your expression of sorrow to them should be appropriate both for their ages and for a parent-child relationship. Save your intimate confessions for your therapist or friends.

All that said, it wouldn't hurt to have a merry vase of daisies on the breakfast table.

Establish fun, new rituals.

How about French toast for dinner? How about dinner in the bathtub? How about French toast for dinner in the bathtub?

To compensate for the time lost with my children when they moved to their dad's home for nine days each month, I found new ways to spend time together. Instead of sleeping in and expecting them to fetch their own bowls of Wheaties, I would get up early, cut fresh fruit, set the breakfast table with pretty placemats and make things like pancakes, bacon and hot chocolate, as though we had gone to bed at home and awakened at the Four Seasons.

After a waiting period, a new pet can add love and joy to your home.

Four months after the separation, we got a [puppy](#). This was a great way for our reconfigured family to bond.

Beforehand, I had read that parents may experience disappointment if they expect their children to take care of a new dog. Ours was a low-maintenance guy, whom I was happy to feed twice a day and take outside 3 times a day. Whenever I asked the kids for help, I generally received it.

Give each child the chance to talk to a therapist.

Try to find a good therapist, who is experienced with children. If that is beyond your financial means, perhaps you can enlist a trusted adult friend or relative.

Strive for win-win-win results.

My ex and I agreed to celebrate the children's birthdays together. Four years after we separated, we began taking an annual beach vacation with the kids, which they all love.

As when flying, first save yourself.

Exercise or yoga can help you feel good about your body and soul. I joined a gym and also did yoga. If you can't block out that kind of time, try to find opportunities like walking up and down stairs rather than taking elevators and/or using an exercise DVD even if only for 5 minutes at a time.

If you have a new love interest, everyone benefits when you put the children's interests first.

At some point the kids will need to understand everyone's place in the family. However, children are more likely to take a shine to the new amour if you make them feel as though they come first. That way, everyone wins (I don't mean to suggest that this is as simple and as uncomplicated as it sounds).

Consult a good book, such as [*Vicky Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents: Helping Your Children Cope With Divorce and its Aftermath.*](#)