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Helping Children Cope With Divorce

by Dena B. Targ, Extension Specialist, Human Development

The decision to divorce is difficult for everyone involved—especially the children. If you and your spouse have recently decided to divorce, this bulletin is designed to provide you with information and suggestions for helping your children cope. These suggestions are general and are meant to be guidelines. You know your children best and should talk with them about divorce in the same way that you talk with them about any difficult problem.

As soon as a divorce has been decided upon, tell the children in terms that are as clear and unemotional as possible. Having reached the decision that divorce is the best course of action for them, many conscientious parents avoid telling their children. They sometimes feel that it is too difficult to talk to their children about the divorce, or that they will be sparing the children’s feelings if they put off telling them. However, it is likely that parents have been fighting, crying and arguing for a while before the decision to divorce is finally reached. Children are aware of problems in the home. The truth may be difficult to deal with, but talking about it early will be easier in the long run than allowing the children to develop imagined fears or misplaced guilt. Knowing is better than imagining because it allows the children to begin to take steps to cope with the situation. Tell the children at their level, in a way that they can understand. They do not need all the details, but they do deserve an appropriate explanation.

Here is an example of a discussion for preschool children from Talking About Divorce by Earl A. Grollman:

"We aren’t happy with each other. We don’t want to live together. I know it hurts you to hear this. You’ve watched us. You’ve seen how we are, haven’t you? This is why we decided not to stay together anymore. This is called DIVORCE. It is when Mommy and Daddy will no longer live in the same house together."

Listen to the children’s questions and answer in a manner which is concrete and brief. Try to listen to the questions the children are really asking. For example, if Margaret asks ten times about being able to play with her best friend on Saturday, and next Saturday, and the next.... is she asking if you will be moving? Maybe she is saying, “Will we move out of our house? Will I go to the same school?” Try to give the children as accurate a picture as possible about future arrangements.

If children do not ask questions, do not assume that they are unconcerned. During a quiet time, bring the subject up. You might say something like, “You must feel sad that Daddy isn’t living here with us. Many children do.”

Telling the children once will certainly not be enough. They will probably have many questions and emotions to discuss with you. If you do not already set aside some part of the day, however small, to talk with your children, do it now. Even though you are busy and you have your own problems and emotions to deal with, figure out when you can regularly give your complete attention to each child. Maybe just before bed is a good time or perhaps after supper. Spontaneous questions will come up, too. While some may be urgent, others can wait for the time you have set aside.

Reassure the children that they will still be loved. If both parents expect to continue to love them and remain interested in their well-being, tell the children that the parents are divorcing each other, not them. When you know, explain what the situation will be in terms of visiting and other contact. However, do not lie. If one parent has deserted the family, or lives in the vicinity but does not visit, it will cause confusion to tell the children that the absent parent still loves them. If a parent can supposedly love the children and at the same time not be interested in them, it is hard to understand what love is. Children will benefit in the long run from the truth, although they will need extra support for their self-concept. They should be helped to understand that the problem lies with the unloving parent, not with them. Point out that they are lovable to other people now and will be in the future.

Another important factor is to stress the fact that the decision is final. Many children harbor the hope
that their parents will remarry. They create elaborate fantasies in their minds and plan to figure out ways to get them together again.

In It's Not the End of the World, sixth grader Karen Newman plots to get her father to come home and constructs the following scene:

Once Daddy comes home and sees Mom, everything will work out fine. I just know it. First, they'll look at each other and then they'll touch hands. Finally, Daddy will kiss her and they'll never fight again.

Adults sometimes think it will soften the blow if they sound less sure of the decision. Therefore, they tell the children that perhaps they will reconsider. However, if the decision is final, the children will still have to deal with that reality. It is best to tell them the truth as soon as possible. It will eventually become apparent to them and they will stop fooling themselves.

Reassure the children that they were not to blame for the breakup. Small children especially may feel that their misbehavior caused problems for their parents. Or they may have been angry at some time and wished that a parent would go away or disappear. They need to be told that wishing would not make it happen.

Sometimes children put two things together and come to the wrong answer. One such child, seven-year-old Susan, heard her sister say that her parents had been arguing and fighting for seven years. She concluded that her birth must have been the cause of their problems and therefore the divorce.

Expect and respect the children's emotions, which, in addition to anxiety and guilt, may include anger and sadness. Encourage the children to talk to you how they feel. Let them talk about their feelings. Assure them that you understand.

In What Every Kid Should Know About His Parents' Divorce, the authors talk directly to children about two emotions which are common in children whose parents are seeking a divorce.

He feels angry. He feels angry at his mother, angry at his father and frequently angry at himself. He is about to lose something very important to him, and even if he understands why the divorce is taking place, the loss is still important. Losses of important things lead to deep hurts, and deep hurts lead to much anger.

He feels sad. Right after the divorce, a kid often misses his father (or mother) very much and misses all the things they used to do together. He often gets very sad and loses interest in eating, schoolwork, friends and so forth. All these feelings are not only natural and normal, they are expected.

Try to continue a pattern of attention and discipline similar to the one you used before the separation. During a divorce, it is difficult to attend to your own needs and at the same time maintain the relationship you have with your children. However, your support will influence the way in which your children cope with the breakup.

Do not glorify the other parent, but do not criticize unfairly either. Give the children as accurate a picture as possible and let them develop an independent relationship with the other parent. They will eventually see through any exaggerations or falsehoods that you tell them, and that can lead to mistrust and confusion.

Help the children see that they are children in transition. As time passes, they will adjust to their new situation.

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**Children and Divorce: Suggested Readings**

**Divorce in General**

**Divorce and Children**

Written for Adults
- Mosher, Joan Barr (Family Life Specialist, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Rhode Island). Divorce and Children. NE-237.

Written for Children