

# 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. Regardless of the type of arguments and interactions that children experience, children need to know when parents decide to 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. 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."

## 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 thumb-sucking.
- 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 (thumb-sucking) 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.
- 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, yard work, 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.

**Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)**

Source: [MentalHealth.gov](https://www.MentalHealth.gov)