

## Talking to Children About Divorce<sup>1</sup>

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One of the hardest things for parents to talk to children about is divorce. All children feel a strong sense of loss when parents separate or divorce. Kids may rebel, misbehave, or become withdrawn when their parents divorce. Children need as much support as possible from their parents and family while they deal with these emotions.



### Tips for Telling Children

When and what to tell your children about the divorce will depend a lot on their age. Remember these basic tips:

- Tell children about the divorce as soon as you have made a decision and are certain about the divorce. Children need to be told before any changes occur.
- Don't go into great detail about your marital problems with children.

- Tell children about the changes that will happen (moving to a new house, moving to a new school, or beginning visitation). Parents need to listen to children's questions and concerns.
- If possible, parents should tell children about the divorce together. Agree ahead of time on an explanation. This is not the time to argue. This is the time to be very supportive of your children's thoughts and feelings.
- Tell your children often that they are **in no way responsible** for the divorce. Children need to know they are not to blame for what is happening.

Children cannot understand all the issues involved in a divorce. Be sensitive to their loss and don't expect them to behave like adults.

1. This document is FCS 2133, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: December 2002. First published: June 1999. Reviewed: June 2005. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
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## Common Reactions

Divorce is hard for all children, but parents can expect certain behaviors based on their child's age. Look over the list of behaviors. Put a check in the box next to the behavior you have observed in your child.

### Toddler:

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Cries more.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Exhibits baby-like behavior.                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Is fearful if a parent is out of sight.              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Acts irritable, withdraws, and throws more tantrums. |

### Preschooler:

- |                          |                                       |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Expresses a sense of sorrow and loss. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Fears abandonment.                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Blames self.                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Becomes very angry.                   |

### Elementary-Age Child:

- |                          |                               |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Feels angry and deceived.     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Feels a strong sense of loss. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Fears abandonment             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Has difficulty sleeping.      |

### Preteen/Adolescent:

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Feels angry and hurt and does not accept the divorce.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Feels cheated and unsure about trusting future relationships. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Is highly moralistic and critical.                            |

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Is more rebellious and acts out in uncharacteristic ways. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Has different friends.                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | School performance is declining.                          |

## Guidelines to Help Children Cope

The following are ways parents can relieve some of the stress children feel when experiencing a divorce.

- ✓ Reassure your children you love them. Provide a safe, warm and loving home.
- ✓ Encourage them to share their questions and any feelings they might have about the divorce.
- ✓ Let them spend time with another adult of the opposite sex. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, or trusted friends are good choices.
- ✓ Children need consistency. As much as possible follow your usual family routines. Routines give children a sense of security and may help to ease fears of abandonment.
- ✓ Never speak badly about your former spouse in front of your children. Talk about those feelings only when you are alone with another trusted adult.
- ✓ Avoid using your children as a way of communicating with your former spouse about child support payments, custody issues, or coordinating visits. This can hurt your children.

- ✓ Don't depend on your children for support. Join a single parent group or talk to good friends or close family members when you need support and encouragement. You can also seek help from a counselor. Children can become scared if they feel a parent can't take care of him or herself.



### Let's Talk About Visitation

Avoid using visitation as a way to punish the other parent. This will hurt your children as well as your former spouse. Visitation times should be established in advance and only changed when both parents agree. If visitations are to go smoothly, children must feel a sense of ownership in each parent's home. To make children's adjustment to both homes easier, keep the following things in mind:

- 1) Have children keep personal items in both homes. This will help children feel a sense of belonging in each place. Keep enough at each home so that children don't need to pack a suitcase. This will keep children from feeling that they are visitors in either place.
- 2) Have open communication with your former spouse. If possible, have the same rules in each home. This consistency will help your children feel that adults are in charge.
- 3) Treat your former spouse with courtesy and respect. Keep a pleasant tone when she or he comes to pick up the children for visits. Do the same when talking about other issues related to the children.

- 4) Allow your child to phone the other parent whenever he or she wants.

List some other ways you will help make this life change easier for your children. Commit to consistently using them.

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Time can heal the wounds a divorce brings to a family. For the healing process to work, parents need to be committed to showing respect for one another, using open communication, and having a lot of patience with their children. It often takes approximately two years for children to adjust to their parents divorce.

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