

Parenting on Your Own After Divorce

Four years after the divorce, things are better for Maria and her two children. Sometimes she remembers how things were after she and Roberto were separated – all the anger, hurt and fear, and never enough time for all the work. She wonders how she and the kids made it but now Maria feels that she and the children are stronger. She believes she’s a better parent and after some struggles, both children are doing well. They communicate better than ever and they come to her with their problems. Maria feels good about her family.

Being a single parent during or after a divorce or separation can be very difficult and a lot of work. This Kids Today newsletter addresses issues related to coping with divorce and making things easier and better for children.

Coping with the initial loss

Depending on the quality of the relationship, divorce and separation can leave many intense emotions. Thoughts of how you can make it on your own combined with feelings of shame, hurt, and loneliness make it very difficult to continue with the routines of daily life.

Kids experiencing divorce also feel many different emotions. A common feeling for children in this situation is that divorce happened because of something they did or didn’t do. Kids easily blame themselves for the family unhappiness and may show this in negative behaviors, depression or anger. Also, children will often begin to take care of their hurting parent.



For example, when a parent cries or expresses sadness related to the divorce or separation the child comforts the parent. Often parents in the midst of grief don’t realize that this is happening. It is very important that in sad times, parents grieve in their way and kids grieve in their own way.

Rebuilding the family

It is important that the family rebuild itself in a way that all members’ needs will be met. The family may need new rules, new expectations and maybe changes in responsibilities.

This can be very difficult if it is not known how active the other parent will be in the family’s life. Uncertainty about the frequency of their presence and their role in the home can create more anxiety for the children.

One big issue is what the visitation schedule will be. This is likely a very heated topic and can lead to tempers flaring very fast. It is very important for all family members, but especially children, to have a very clear understanding of who will do what and what the visitation will be. They also need assurance that they can talk about the other parent without getting in trouble or causing others to get upset.

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Parenting on Your Own (Continued)

Sometimes it is difficult for parents who are divorced to get along with one another after all is said and done, but the relationship has to be maintained for the sake of the children.

Keep children out of the middle

The hurt, anger, and worries you may experience are real yet it does not mean your children need to know and be exposed to all of it. Similarly, it is not beneficial to explain all the negative qualities of their other parent. They still very much love and care for both of you. Complaining in front of your child puts the child in a difficult position of trying to figure out how to keep both people happy. Children may also interpret that you are criticizing them as well.

In summary, children are better able to adapt when parents can talk to each other in a calm manner, avoid arguments or put-downs in front of the children, and value the role and time of each parent in their children's lives.

Adapted from:

Molgaard, V. K. (revised by Greder, K.) (2003). Parenting on your own (Fact sheet Pm-1547D). Iowa State University Extension.

Tips for Non-Resident Fathers or Mothers

1. Make a schedule to visit with your child

- Schedule phone calls and regular visits
- Follow through and be consistent from week to week (at the same time, place, etc.)
- Don't make a promise you can't keep
- Phone calls are as important as face-to-face visits

2. Learn your child's day-to-day routine

- Learn when they go to bed and wake up so you can coordinate calls and visits
- Learn what and when they like to eat
- Know play and homework times

3. Show interest in your child's school and other activities

- Let them know that the things they do while living with their other parent are important to you
- Follow-up on school projects, homework, and activities
- Make a priority to attend events



4. Pay child support

- This shows your commitment to your child's well being
- It's the law in most places
- This will eliminate a common source of conflict between you and the children's other parent

5. Coordinate parenting strategies

- Big differences in households leaves children feeling confused and more likely to develop emotional and/or behavioral problems
- Keep healthy communication open about parenting issues such as discipline, expectations of behavior, rewards, schedules, etc.
- Consistency between homes is essential

6. Help your child adjust to other adults that come into their home life

- Be aware of how your child may be affected by mom's or dad's other friends or a new "significant other"
- Feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and disapproval are common
- Limit conflict at this time

7. Spend time with your child by reading

- Reading to or with your child allows you to spend quiet time in a one-on-one fashion
- It helps to enhance your bond and your communication with your child

8. Don't be just a vacation for your child

- Their visits with you should not be about spoiling them or trying to be the more "fun" parent - this can't last forever, doesn't benefit the child's needs and development, and it makes transitions between homes much more difficult
- Don't get caught in the trap of always having a special event or gift planned
- Participating in your child's everyday activities shows that you care about all phases of their life

9. Tell your child how much you love them, loudly and often

- They need extra reassurance that their parents care for them and love them very much
- Sometimes children feel that they are to blame for the breakup or fear their parents didn't love them enough to stay together
- Communicate your affection, help your child build a sense of security, and assure them that you will be there to help with their struggles

10. Minimize conflict between you and their other parent in all ways possible

- It's important to stop hard feelings from spilling over and affecting the way you parent your children
- The more that you work to reduce conflict between you and your child's other parent, the

easier it will be to play an important healthy role in your child's life

Adapted from:

Evans, G. & Perkins, D. (1999). Parenting when apart: Tips for non-resident fathers. University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension.

Helping Children through Divorce

What Can Parents Do?

When divorce is not something that can be prevented or is the best decision for family members, what can parents do to help minimize the negative effects on their children? How can they help make the new family structure as positive as possible?

First of all, parents need to know that not all negative effects mentioned in research studies will be experienced by all children of divorce. Individual reactions by adults as well as children to divorce and separation will vary. The time it takes to adjust will also be different for every family and individual. Those effects that are present can be made less intense with education, nurturing, good communication, and lots of love.

Parents dealing with a divorce want to protect their children from the same stress and anguish they feel. But avoiding the issue only adds to the stress. Parents need to help their children understand that the family will learn to adapt to new schedules, new environments, and new ways of communicating.

At least two general avenues to help children process the divorce experience are available: outside help and parental effort.

Seeking outside assistance

Asking for and accepting help will allow you and the children to better face the challenges. Ask family members, friends or neighbors for help with such things as child care, special chores, or listening when you need to talk. Such help can benefit your children.

Many parents and children also find assistance and support through counseling or a special program. Look for programs and services that help:

- Children to express and resolve divorce-related anxieties, confusion, blame, and anger
- Parents agree on visitation, custody, and respond appropriately to children's divorce-related concerns
- Develop good post-divorce parental relationships and parent-child relationships
- Parents resolve issues of conflict, anger, and disappointment
- Establish support systems of friends and relatives

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service and other agencies provide "Co-parenting through Divorce" classes in many communities across the state. Various youth and family service agencies, mental health centers, counselors, churches and other organizations may also provide parent education, support programs, or counseling.

Parenting Tips

Specific things that parents can do to help themselves and their children include:

- Let children know that they are loved
- Understand that children need predictability.
- Children need relationships with both parents, if at all possible.
- Keep children out of the middle of parental conflicts.
- Provide children with positive adult role models.
- Let some things go or change regular routines to adjust to the demands.
- Divide chores and let the children be responsible for taking care of their own possessions and rooms.
- Parents as well as children need time to do things they enjoy. Include the children in a social or recreational activity everyone can enjoy. Look for free or inexpensive activities and entertainment.
- Make a budget and stick to it.
- Find out about financial assistance programs such as food stamps and Medicaid.
- Do not expose children to casual relationships with members of the opposite sex. If a serious relationship develops, introduce the person slowly into the children's lives.

References:

- DeBord, K. (1996). The effects of divorce on young children (Fact sheet). Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service.
- Molgaard, V. K. (revised by Greder, K.) (2003). Parenting on your own (Fact sheet Pm-1547D). Iowa State University Extension.

Children's Common Reactions to Divorce

Divorce is hard for all children, but parents and caregivers can expect certain behaviors based on their child's age and stage of development. Each child will be different in how they react and cope. It is important to look for and understand these possible behaviors and consider how you can be sensitive and support them through family transitions or stress.

Toddlers may:

- Cry more and be clingy
- Return to baby-like behavior
- Be fearful if a parent is out of sight
- Act irritable, withdraw, and throw more tantrums
- Have problems sleeping or change toilet habits

Preschoolers may:

- Express a sense of sorrow and loss
- Fear abandonment
- Blame self, become very angry
- Have fantasies and "wish" what they want

Elementary-age children may:

- Show anger and feel deceived
- Feel a strong sense of loss
- Fear abandonment
- Have difficulty sleeping or eating

Preteens/Adolescents may:

- Feel angry and hurt, and not accept the divorce
- Feel cheated and unsure about trusting future relationships
- Be highly moralistic and critical
- Be more rebellious and act out in uncharacteristic ways
- Have a decline in school performance
- Become depressed, withdrawn, and lose self-esteem

Adapted from:

Ferrer, M. & McCrea, S. (2002). Talking to children about divorce (Fact sheet FCS 2133). Florida Cooperative Extension Service, UF/IFAS.

Oesterreich, L. (1996). Divorce matters: A child's view (Fact sheet PM-1639). Iowa State University Extension.

Edited by:

Debbie Richardson

Debbie Richardson, Assistant Child Development Specialist, and Shannon Dial, Graduate Assistant, Human Development & Family Science Department, College of Human Environmental Sciences. If you need larger print or other accommodations, please contact 405-744-6231, debbie.richardson@okstate.edu

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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service
139 Ag Hall
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078