

DIVORCE

The stress of divorce is associated with negative emotional, behavioral, social consequences. However, not all children respond the same way. Some adjust well and other exhibit significant difficulties. Common responses include anger, fear, depression, divided parent loyalty, and guilt. In preschool and young elementary school children, they may be self-blame, reversion to more immature behavior, and intense separation anxiety. In adolescents there may be behavioral difficulties such as undesirable peer activities, smoking, drug and alcohol use, and school behavior and falling grades.

Part of the problem is post divorce households are more disorganized. Predictable household events and routines (e.g., mealtime, bedtime, and chores) usually become inconsistent. Disciplining of children also becomes inconsistent with parents alternating between being detached to being highly punitive. The parent without primary custody usually spends less and less time with the child over time. Although it may be more difficult as a single parent, it is important to establish predictable household routines and predictable visitation routines. This is especially important for younger children.

The relationship between divorced parents is the most crucial factor in deciding if children will experience significant adjustments difficulties. Children exposed to conflict and hostility between their parents are more likely to experience problems. It is important for parents to hide their conflicts from their children. It is also important that children maintain close relationships with both parents. Children need mothers and fathers! Some suggestions for handling transitions from one parent to another are:

1. Find a private time to speak with your former spouse about the transitions. Explain that you believe the child needs to spend time with each of you and profits from it, and that you would like the transitions to be free of stress as much as possible for all concerned. Try to identify the sources of problems, and offer constructive suggestions that apply to both of you. Do not lose your temper or willingness to continue trying if this approach is not immediately welcomed by your former spouse.
2. Before transition, prepare yourself for it. Try to get in touch with your emotions about the child's departure or return and learn to control your anxiety, fear, and/or anger. Showing these emotions to your children could be detrimental to their stability.
3. Prepare your child for the transition. Tell him/her that mommy or daddy will pick him/her up for their time together. Whenever possible, spend some quiet time together just before he/she is due to leave. However, do not start an engrossing pastime that will be interrupted by the other parents' arrival. Use confident and supportive tone of voice when you talk to the child about going with the other parent.

Be ready to acknowledge that it is sad to say goodbye, but be equally ready to remind him/her that he/she has a good time with the other parent.

4. Make use of transitional objects – favorite toy or blanket that the child can take along and bring back.
5. Agree with your former spouse that phone calls will not be restricted. Offer to the child the chance to call the other parent when she is with you.
6. Speak positively to the child about the other parent and their relationship.
7. It is important that parents communicate about their child's behavior and needs. If parents can communicate without becoming hostile, having regular "family" meetings where the child's behavior and needs are discussed is best. In these meetings, the child is present and listens to his/her parents communicating. Parents support each other in praising good behavior. If parents can't talk peacefully, communication through letters is best. At transitions, parent A hands a letter to parent B (this letter can be mailed if all contact is contraindicated) about the child's behavior. When parent B gets home, he/she sits down with the child and supports parent A by appropriately expressing praise and disappointment. This communication is important because a child's conscience is developed from his/her parent's emotional reactions to his/her behavior. This communication results in better moral development and more consistent behavior as well as more emotional security.