

## Successful Adaptation to Separation or Divorce

By using the following tips you can help your child adapt to separation or divorce.

- Emphasize that the divorce or separation is entirely a parental decision and not your child's fault.
- Mention, if true, that every effort was made to preserve the marriage or family unit.
- Point out, if true, that the decision is irreversible.
- Be open to and encourage your child's inevitable questions; if your child does not ask questions, do not assume that "everything is okay." Be prepared to repeatedly offer answers to your child's questions in the months following your announcement of the separation or divorce. Many young adults who were children when their parents divorced feel no one talked to them about the divorce.
- Reassure your child that her needs will be met. Explain where she will live and go to school, where the other parent will live, and when she will see the other parent.
- Try to avoid moving, if possible, so that your child can continue to attend the same school and maintain relationships with friends.
- Reassure your child that both parents love him and, if true, will continue to have a close relationship with him.
- When possible, offer adult support from other relatives, teachers, primary care health professionals, clergy, or family friends. Fewer than 10 percent of children of divorced families report additional nonfamily adult support.



- Try to spend individual time with each of your children every day.
- Avoid using your child as a messenger, "pawn," or spy.
- Do not ask your child to take sides. Try to avoid saying negative things about the other parent in front of your child. Raise your child in an atmosphere where the conflict between separated or divorced parents is minimal or readily resolved.
- Be aware that many children do not know their parents' marriage is troubled. Few children experience relief with the divorce decision; those who do are usually older and have witnessed open conflict between their parents. Watch for changes in behavior and school functioning, as this may be a symptom of psychological distress.
- Know that sleep disturbances among young children after a separation or divorce are common. The preoccupying worry is usually abandonment by both parents. Repeated reassurance may help.
- Try to establish a stable and predictable routine for meals, bedtime, and other regular activities.
- Keep promises to your child.
- Respect generational boundaries. Do not share adult concerns with your child. Refrain from treating your child as a peer, as this may overwhelm her with feeling responsible for taking care of you.

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## Successful Adaptation to Separation or Divorce (continued)

- Maintain discipline. A diminished ability to parent is an expectable short-term (but not long-term) consequence of divorce. Take care of your own mental health needs.
  - Be aware that your child may be especially sensitive to worries about being alone. A child's fear of abandonment at the time of the family breakup may be unintentionally reinforced by subtle changes in his parents' attitudes and behaviors.
  - Demonstrate your skills in conflict resolution. Avoid needless provocation or name-calling, hear your child out, and work toward mutually satisfying solutions.
  - Develop a new relationship with your former partner in which you do not undermine his or her parental role.
  - Develop a new or altered concept of effective family functioning by taking classes, joining parenting groups, going to counseling, and finding new family role models.
  - Help your child resolve losses, anger, and self-blame; help her accept the breakup and achieve realistic hopes for relationships.
  - Always remember birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions.
  - Attend special activities in which your child is a participant.
- Know that no single circumstance is associated with poor outcome. Protective factors that can help avoid a poor outcome include ongoing communication among family members, your child's ability to remain separate from parental conflict and distress, and resuming customary pursuits.
  - Develop a new, meaningful life of your own.
  - If discord between you and your partner is ongoing, you have difficulty following through with the above recommendations, or your child is having problems doing the things he normally does, ask your primary care health professional for more advice or referral for counseling.

### RESOURCE

Wolf A. 1988. *Why Did You Have to Get a Divorce? And When Can I Get a Hamster?* New York, NY: Noonday Press.

### REFERENCES

- Green M. 1988. Reaching out to the children of divorce. *Contemporary Pediatrics* 5(2):22-42.
- Wallerstein JS, Blakeslee S. 1996. *Second Chances: Men, Women & Children a Decade After Divorce*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
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