

Helping Children and Teens Cope with Separation/Divorce

Separation or divorce is stressful for both parents and children alike. This is a significant change to the family system and children and teens often struggle emotionally and behaviorally. Research has demonstrated that the degree of tension between separating parents is directly related to how children or teens respond and adjust to the separation.

Common Reactions:

Children and teens find it difficult to express their feelings verbally and therefore often act out emotionally or behaviorally in response to stressors such as parental separation or divorce. The following are some common reactions:

- Anger, directed at the parents for separating or targeted towards one parent whom the child or teen may feel is to “blame”
- Increased irritability
- Anxiety, wondering what will happen to them
- Sadness, crying spells or withdrawal
- Guilt, feeling as if they caused the separation
- Difficulty separating from one or both parents
- Regressive behaviors, demonstrating difficulty with skills previously mastered
- Hyper-maturity, attempting to take on adult roles and responsibilities
- Difficulty sleeping or feeling overtired
- Changes in appetite
- Difficulty concentrating
- False hope, in terms of wishing for the parents to reconcile

Tips to Help:

If you are thinking about separation or divorce or are currently in the process, here are some strategies to help address this difficult time with your child or teen.

1. Tell your children as soon as possible. It's likely that they have already picked up on the tensions within your marriage, so a discussion should occur sooner rather than later.
2. Talk with them together. It's better for your child or teen to hear from both of you so that you both present a united front.
3. Provide reassurances. Children and teens may feel that they are the cause of the separation. Repeatedly reassure them that this is in no way the case.

4. Remain involved. Although tensions may make it difficult for both parents to be in contact with each other, it is of utmost importance for both to remain an integral part of the children's lives on a daily basis.

5. Show restraint. Don't speak negatively of each other in front of your child or teen. Don't use them as pawns in the divorce process. You are both their parents and it's important for both of you to have a positive relationship with your children well into the future.

6. Talk to each other. Don't communicate through the children. Communication between parents is integral to share information regarding the children's emotional, behavioral, and academic status.

7. Establish rules and expectations similar for both households. Don't be more lenient just to “gain favor with” your child or teen or to “make up for” the separation.

8. Maintain a structure and routine consistent across both households. This includes bedtimes, mealtimes, and homework time. The more consistent the routine, the more positively your child or teen will adjust to residing in two homes.

9. Encourage talk of feelings. Both parents should set aside time on a regular basis to talk with the children, to encourage the expression of thoughts and feelings, and to validate such expressions.

10. Remember the big picture. You will both be parents for as long as you are alive. This means high school and college graduations, weddings, the birth of grandchildren. All of these events will be much more enjoyable if the two of you are able to peacefully be in the same room together.

11. Take care of your self emotionally. If you're able to adjust, your child or teen will be more likely to do so as well. You will be setting a positive coping example for them and you will be more emotionally available to help them through the process.

12. Seek help. Sometimes children or teens benefit from talking with someone who is not involved in the situation. Within therapy, either individual or group, they will have a space to freely express their thoughts and feelings.