

How to Help Your Child Cope with a Divorce

It's not difficult to observe that divorce is a common phenomenon in today's society. Most estimates are that 50 percent of marriages end in divorce, meaning that a large portion of families and children are affected. Divorce's impact on children is great, because they are developing and growing in all aspects of their lives – especially cognitively and emotionally. They are learning about the world, and if they develop as children in chaos and conflict, that is how they are learning to live as adults.

Developing future men and women is the most powerful job in the world. Parents need to remember that even the smoothest and most cordial of divorces have an impact on kids. Fortunately, kids with good support, structure and consistency usually learn to adjust and cope well, and can continue their healthy development. Additionally, they can learn about how grownups get along even when there is conflict or disagreement.

Unfortunately, divorce often does not go smoothly, creating immense conflict, anger and resentment between the parents, including fights over custody and visitation. This can have a significant impact on children and their overall development. The pattern that often occurs is that the parents' anger and emotions regarding the marital relationship are so overwhelming to them that they overshadow the impact on their children.

Children often experience loyalty issues and feel like they must choose between their parents. Many children feel like the conflict between their parents is their fault, or that they could stop it if they change somehow. Often children act out behaviorally or experience depression, anger or isolation, or they may engage in risky behaviors as a means to cope or gain their parents' attention. Kids who are still developing don't yet have the tools to cope in a healthy way with strong emotions. They learn these skills from parents and caregivers, and they will model the coping behaviors they see. So if these individuals don't regulate their own feelings well, it is even more difficult for their children.

Another pattern is that parents intentionally or unintentionally put their kids "in the middle," meaning they may speak badly of each other in front of the child, use the child as a messenger to the other parent, pressure the child for information about the other parent, or use custody or visitation as an element of control. These situations can cause confusing feelings that kids have limited ability to understand.

There are things grownups can do to help kids withstand a divorce and continue to develop in a healthy manner.

- Keep adult issues on that level. Children shouldn't be kept in the dark about what is happening and how their lives are changing, but they should not be involved in the conflicts, domestic violence disputes, or negativity. They should not hear details like infidelity, money problems, etc. that occur between the adults.
- Children should never be used as pawns in parental conflicts over visitation or custody. Kids need to be told genuinely and repeatedly that divorce is not their fault, and that they can love both parents no matter what. They need to hear that they are loved by both parents and that their roles as mom or dad are not changing. They should be reassured that even though their parents don't love each other the same, that they both love the kids the same, even if they don't all live together anymore.
- It is important to explain to kids what living arrangements will be – when they are to be with mom or dad, how school is impacted, where will they sleep and eat, what happens to the pets, if they can call the other parent and when, etc. Whatever the arrangements are, parents should always be consistent with those arrangements.
- If parents are unable to communicate with each other, kids should not be used as messengers between the two. It is unfair and harmful to a child to be asked to remind a parent about paying child support, to collect personal belongings from the home, etc.

Many kids grow up in divorce situations, and it does not have to be a hopelessly negative experience. If kids remain the priority, and the impact on them always considered, they can grow and flourish even though their family has changed. This is where All Faiths can be helpful to kids and families. All Faiths can provide the support, coaching, guidance and a safe place to express difficult emotions by both kids and parents through therapy and parent support services. All Faiths can help guide parents in giving their kids the messages they need to hear, minimizing any negative impact and supporting their healthy development.

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