

# DIVORCE, KIDS, AND STRESS

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Before, during, and after their parents' separation or divorce, most children and teens find themselves with enormous stress. Emotional development, learning, friendships, and behaviour can all be upset by the fundamental changes. When parents decide, for whatever reason, to separate, their kids and teens will need plenty of careful support.

Kids fear change, and the changes involved with separation and divorce are enormous and can be overwhelming. A young person's whole conception of "family" needs to change, and this is no small thing given that there's nothing more fundamental to a child's sense of self than home and family. Relationships with both parents change. Sometimes kids don't see one parent much and a child might suddenly lose touch with half of her aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Other kids have to split their time between two homes, with two bedrooms, and two sets of rules and expectations. Familiar places and things change or disappear. Families move. Sometimes neighborhoods, schools, and even towns or cities change. There's an adjustment of routines: holidays are different. Given the nature and number of changes involved in separation and divorce, some kids start to fear that the world will never settle down. Some kids worry a lot about all of this during classes at school, and wonder for example who will pick them up from daycare, take them to soccer, or come to their spring fair at school. They worry whether weekend plans will actually come to pass or whether one parent or the other will have enough money. Sometimes it's hard for kids to feel safe.

The fact is that kids commonly blame themselves for family conflict, or try in various ways to take control of a situation that is

entirely beyond their control. Even older children or teens may not really understand an idea as tricky as their parents' fighting or separation. Tension or arguments between parents sometimes leave children feeling guilty, angry, and alone. It's hardest for kids when parents try to get them to take sides in disputes, or undermine one another with the kids. This just saddles kids with decisions they're not at all equipped to make, ought not to have to make, and can be extremely confusing and damaging. Kids tend to work hard to get their parents back together, and hold onto dreams of parental reconciliation for the rest of their lives. Some kids and teens even develop psychological or physical illnesses, which serve as unconscious efforts to bring their parents together.

Kids' reactions to separation and divorce vary just as adults' reactions do, but it's a given that the dissolution of a marriage will be stressful.





The age and gender of the child are relevant, as is the extent and nature of conflict preceding and during the separation, the custody arrangements afterward and time with each parent. It matters how well mom and dad communicate with one another about their kids' needs, how each parent adjusts to separation and to parenting in their respective home, and how they deal with the conflict between them after divorce. The level of emotional, social and economic stability in each home is important, as is how well each parent talks about the divorce with their kids.

Infants and young children don't understand the conflict around them, but will probably react to changes in their parents' mood, energy level, and attentiveness. Older infants may notice when one parent is no longer living in the home. It's common for infants to have less appetite or upset stomach, changes in sleeping and difficulty with daily routines, more irritability, crying and fussing, and greater difficulty settling. Parents should keep routines as normal as possible. Reassure infants with continued presence, physical affection and loving words. Remain warm, calm, and safe in front of the child. Keep the child's favorite toys, blankets, or stuffed animals nearby.

A Toddler may know that his or her parents are fighting and notice when one parent has moved away, but doesn't understand why. At this age, a child may express sympathy for others, such as a parent, or siblings who are feeling sad. They may be especially anxious—crying or clinging or worrying—when mom is out of sight, and may be irritable or unaccountably angry, especially with one parent. Eating and sleep routines may change, and some children may have nightmares. Some toddlers take steps backward in toilet training and regress to old behaviors such as thumb-sucking.

Parents need to keep routines as normal as possible for toddlers under stress. Affectionate words and a warm, calm presence can help. Try not to be in a hurry. Slow down the pace of the day and spend time alone with your child playing, cuddling, and reading. Allow extra time for separations. For example, make a point of arriving fifteen minutes earlier to childcare and helping with the transition away from you. Discuss your child's situation with other adults who care for him or her. Minor regressions make sense given your child's stress, and your child will regain skills once he



feels more comfortable. Allow some regression to infantile behaviors, but set clear limits.

Preschool and primary grade school children have only a limited understanding of divorce. Kids at this age start to understand that divorce means their parents don't love each other as they used to and aren't going to live together anymore. Some kids react by spending more time in fantasy, both pleasant and unpleasant in tone. Fantasies may include elaborate scenarios about their parents reuniting. Others become accident-prone. They often blame themselves for the divorce and believe that they should be punished for trivial things they've done. They may grieve the absence of one parent, feel deceived or rejected by the parent who has left, and angrily blame the other parent for the absence or hold the anger inside. Children this age worry about the changes in their daily lives and might worry that nobody will be there to pick them up from school. Headaches, stomach-aches, loss of appetite, sleep problems, and nightmares are common. The stress of the divorce commonly leads to a decline in academic and social achievement. Kids may ignore school and friendships for a while.

Make daily and weekly routines, including in-person and telephone time with each parent, consistent and predictable. Try to slow down the pace of your life (?). Find more unhurried time every day, and set aside child time each day. Encourage the child to talk about how he or she feels. Listen to the child's thoughts and feelings, and be sensitive to fears. Let your child cry and be angry. Answer, in age-appropriate ways, the child's questions about the changes that are taking place. It's important that children hear again and again, in different ways, that they are not responsible for the divorce. Kids need to hear that their needs will be met and that they'll be taken care of even though the family is changing. Gently but clearly remind children that the divorce is final, and that mom and dad are not going to get back together. Plan special time together.

Preteens and adolescents may understand more about divorce, but still blame themselves for it and struggle hard to accept the changes it brings to their family. Kids feel abandoned when one parent moves out of the family home. At this age, kids increasingly concentrate on exploring relationships beyond the family. Adolescence is a time when kids learn that they're both part of and separate from their nuclear and extended family, and friendships become more important than ever. When there's as foundational a change in the family as divorce, the tasks of adolescence become much more difficult. Beliefs and assumptions about family, love, and marriage are shaken, and the pressure of the emotional changes can lead to a whole range of feelings and behaviours. Children this age may show extreme behaviour under stress, and become either moralistic and perfectly-behaved or involved in high-risk behaviours and use bad language or become aggressive or rebellious when they never have before. Kids may start to worry about grown-up problems such as financial security and the emotional welfare of one or both parents. They may take on adult roles with parents, younger siblings, and friends, and may actually find themselves needing to take on far more responsibility in the family than ever before. They may have a sense of suddenly growing up, and may withdraw from friends and favorite activities in favour of staying home. A teen may try to cut one or both parents out of their life.

In addition to hearing that the divorce is not their fault, it's important for kids to hear that, although their parents have divorced, neither parent has divorced the kids. Work hard to keep lines of communication open with the teenager, but don't involve him or her in parental struggles. It's important for both parents to remain involved in the lives of their children, even from two separate homes. Know your teen's friends and know what they do together. Keep to family routines and maintain rules. Understand that an authoritative parenting style, warm and loving, with clearly-defined and explained



expectations for appropriate behaviour tends to make kids feel safest. Parents need to stay involved in children's school and academic life, and in other activities. Maintain family rituals and routines: Sunday dinners, grocery shopping and other chore times, regular homework times, movie nights at home, and regular one-to-one times with the teen are all important. If you do need to increase children's responsibilities at home, assign chores

appropriate to their age; and show appreciation for the contribution. Tell him or her whether mom or dad or both will attend sporting events and special occasions. Don't use teenagers as confidants. Don't discuss adult problems with him or her. Parents need to have their emotional needs met away from the children. Consistent, predictable, and thoughtful involvement, as well as words, show your love.

## Strategies for parents to help kids with divorce

To help kids cope with the stress of parental separation and divorce, parents and others in the child's life need to help the child understand the new ways, roles, and routines of the family and to feel as safe as possible in the new order of things.

Kids need a chance to explore the complex mixture of thoughts and feelings that come with such a major event. It's a long, slow adjustment. Here are a few things that might help:



Talk about divorce as a family. Parents often have a hard time finding words to discuss issues as important as parental breakup with children. Straight information delivered at the right level is best. How the news is delivered is important to children, so it's important for parents to plan carefully about when, how, and what they will tell their children. When possible, grown-ups and children should meet together as a family. This way parents can deliver the news together and can answer the children's questions. A family meeting led by two parents may help parents avoid blaming each other.

Remember that divorce is hard or even impossible for children to understand. During the first family meeting, don't give too much information at once. Limit discussion to the most important and immediate issues. Both parents should speak if possible. This is emotionally loaded material, but both parents must try to stay calm.

The children need to know that mom and dad have decided to divorce, and that this means they're not going to be married anymore and will be living in two different homes.

Children need to hear that their basic needs will be met, that a parent will still be making their breakfast in the morning, helping with homework, and tucking them into bed at night.

It's vital that kids and teens hear right away that the divorce is not their fault and that nothing they did caused their parents to decide this.

Kids also need to know right away that, although their parents are separating from one another, neither parent is separating from the children. Kids need to know that their relationships with both parents will continue.

Parents need to tell kids that mom and dad will always be their parents, and that they're going to cooperate to make sure that the kids are all right.

Plan to meet again as a family soon.

Remember to ask children about their fears and concerns. Give children and teens time to think about the divorce and the changes coming. Meet again as a family to talk about new questions

and to reassure children of your ongoing involvement in their lives.

## Professional Help

Of course words and actions don't always match, and even the best parents unintentionally put their kids in the middle of parental conflict. For the kids' sake, take advantage of professional resources available to your family.

**For the Sake of the Children** is a workshop for separating and divorcing parents. Family Conciliation staff specializing in issues of separation and divorce provide information about legal and emotional issues facing separating and divorcing parents, with the aim of helping parents to support children optimally by getting them out of the middle of parental conflict. Both parents are encouraged to participate, but attend separate sessions. Sessions are offered in Winnipeg and elsewhere in Manitoba. For more information, call 945-4257 or 1-800-282-8069 extension 4257.

**Collaborative divorce:** In addition to the familiar adversarial family law approach, there's the relatively recent development of collaborative law. A collaborative approach seeks resolutions to legal and other issues that meet the needs and interests of both parents and each child to the greatest possible degree. A divorce coach is a specially trained counselor, social worker, or psychologist who helps one divorcing spouse to recognize and deal with emotional issues that arise during the divorce process, and thereby avoid turning emotional issues into legal ones. For more information, visit [collaborativedivorceprofessionals.ca](http://collaborativedivorceprofessionals.ca).

**Family therapy** with a qualified professional can help:

- to resolve co-parenting conflict and therefore relieve stress within the family and prevent problems for children;





- to help with difficulties in sibling relationships that commonly appear during times of major family stress, including divorce;
- to help one parent and a child resolve difficulties between them.

## Helping kids cope

Parents can't change their child's feelings, and shouldn't try to. But it is important to let your child know you are listening and caring, and that you recognize the impact that the divorce is having on their lives. Parents and other supportive grown-ups need to listen carefully and respectfully. By listening, you demonstrate ongoing care and concern. Children and teens may benefit from receiving help putting feelings of loss and anger into words. Kids and teens need to hear that the divorce is final, and should not be given false hopes of parental reconciliation. Kids need to know that the divorce is not their fault. Just as there was nothing they did to cause it, there's nothing they can do to make it go away. Looking together at family photographs and videotapes can help to get conversation started.

**Play.** Very young children explore ideas and feelings best through play, so parents and others should watch kids in play and play along if invited to. Sand and water play, board games, painting and finger paints, chalkboard drawing, play dough, and puppets are all good. Don't try to direct the play. Don't impose grown-up opinions

on a child's feelings during play, but rather follow the child carefully and respectfully.

**Stories.** Stories can be helpful for kids struggling to manage the feelings that come with such fundamental changes. Relating to fictional characters who have feelings and questions like the ones they have themselves can take away some of a child's loneliness and fear. Just reading together with mom or dad can help a child or teen, as can talking about the thoughts and feelings the characters feel. Talking about a situation from the once-removed safety of a fictional character's perspective can make the thoughts and feelings safer. Look for books to match the emotional situation—loss, change, moving, survival, fear, coping and adversity. Ask a librarian or for help with selecting books.

**Professional supports** are helpful for some children and teens. Parents and others need to be sensitive to signs of depression and fear in children and teens. It's important to seek professional help for a child or teen if their distress is prolonged or intense, but it's often a good idea to seek preventative assistance for kids and teens well before symptoms appear.

In collaborative law, a child specialist is a specially trained counselor, social worker, or registered psychologist. Child specialists concern themselves solely with the needs, interests, fears and other emotions that kids in a divorcing family experience. This specialist gives children a voice in the separation process and helps to ensure that everyone considers the impact of their decisions on the children.



**Group-based therapeutic support** for kids trying to cope with divorce can be helpful. Speak with a psychologist or your child's physician about resources in the community. Check with your child's school about any special programs available for children of divorce.

Consider **individual counseling** for your child. Speaking privately with a counselor or psychologist can help a child cope with divorce.

## Adjustment is not easy

Parents sometimes get frustrated waiting for kids to "get over" the divorce. Divorce may relieve stress for the adults, but even as parents get through the most acute crisis stages, it's important for them to understand that adjusting to a transition as fundamental as divorce may take a very long time for a child or teen.

At least one prominent researcher has argued that the stress of divorce for kids is a more or less permanent condition. Judith Wallerstein, Ph.D., the most widely known researcher into how divorce affects children recently published findings of her 25-year study of 131 children whose parents divorced in the early 1970's. Wallerstein and co-researcher Julia Lewis, Ph.D argue in their 2004 article *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: Report of a 25-Year Study* that divorce is a life-transforming experience, even in the best of circumstances when parents settle their differences without fighting, when financial arrangements are fair, and when kids have ongoing contact with both parents after the divorce.

Wallerstein has her critics within the research community. But there seems to be agreement that, although some children seem to breeze through family separation with few negative effects and even show improvement afterward, divorce needs to be understood as a source of significant stress for many children and teens for a long period of time. Kids need ongoing support when their parents divorce. □

