

# Helping Your Child Adjust Following Separation and Divorce

## Objective

To identify ways to help your child adjust to the changes associated with separation and divorce.

## What to Know

Separation and divorce involve big changes for family life, impacting all family members in different ways. You are probably concerned about how these changes will affect your child.

It will take time for your child to adjust, and they may experience a range of emotions. A younger child might regress or act out, and older children might be angry or feel overwhelmed. These are all normal reactions and will get better over time. Warning signs your child is having more serious trouble adjusting can include:

- anxiety
- prolonged sadness and depression
- significant changes in eating or sleeping habits
- problems at school
- aggressive behavior

For serious adjustment problems, speak to your child's doctor. For less serious adjustment issues, there are practical things you can do to help.

**Plan how to tell your child.** It is best for both parents to do this together. Be honest and keep your child's age and developmental stage in mind. Younger children need less detail, while older children might ask more questions.

**Be clear they are not the cause.** Children sometimes worry that they are to blame for their parents' marital problems. Explain this is an adult problem and there is nothing they can do to prevent or change things.

**Encourage your child to talk about their feelings.** Listen carefully, be patient, and avoid interrupting. Allow them to be open about their fears and concerns. If your child feels uncomfortable talking to you, find someone they trust such as another family member or school counselor.

**Tell them only what they need to know.** Avoid discussing adult decisions or arguing in front of them.

**Discuss living and visitation arrangements with the other parent before you share the plan.** Once you finalize the plan, talk openly about living arrangements. Be clear about who your child will live with and when. Respect an older child's feelings about where they want to live.

**Avoid saying negative things about the other parent, extended family, or friends.** Set “ground rules” when talking with your ex. If you are struggling, seek support from a therapist or family counselor.

**Be polite during pick-up or drop-off times.** If you are kind and reassuring, it will help with transitions.

**Allow your child to connect with the other parent when they want to.** Avoid suggesting that your child is disloyal if they enjoy time with the other parent, or if they express a desire to talk to the other parent when they are with you.

**Respect reasonable limits and rules set by the other parent.** Avoid undermining authority or reversing decisions. Discuss rules and discipline so you are as consistent as possible in both households.

**Do not expect children to act as messengers.** Communicate directly with your ex-partner.

**Keep it simple.** Your child has the right to know what is happening and that things will be OK. Explain in clear, simple, and honest language your child can understand.

**Take time with hard questions.** Sometimes you may not know how to answer tough questions, so give yourself time to think. Tell your child you will get back to them. You might say, “I’m not sure how to answer that. Your mom and I are still working it out.” Encourage your child to talk to the other parent directly, and let your ex know your child has questions.

**Read between the lines.** If your child’s questions are motivated by specific concerns, ask them what they are worrying about. Reassure them with simple words that show you understand.

**Keep the conversation going.** Be prepared to answer questions more than once. Make regular time to talk to discuss concerns.

**Talk about feelings.** Your child will probably see you feeling sad, angry, or upset. Let your child know you love them, and your feelings are not their fault. Seeing you express feelings in a calm and healthy way lets your child know feelings are OK.

**Maintain familiar routines and rituals.** Routines help your child feel secure, safe, and in control. Try to keep daily and weekly routines as familiar and stable as possible. You can create new routines and adapt rituals, too. Work toward creating common routines for both households to follow.

**Involve your child in small decisions.** This can help your child feel like they have some control. Listen carefully and let them know their opinions matter.

**Take time to have fun together.** Do something spontaneous, like having a picnic at the park.

**Read to them.** Age-appropriate books can be a great tool. Check out <https://bookriot.com/divorce-books-for-kids/> or do a Google search.

## What to Do

Taking the above suggestions into account, use this worksheet to discuss the separation and divorce with your child.

Write down your child's age(s). \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any concerns about developmental stage or maturity? Explain.

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Label your feelings and put them into words, and then ask your child to describe what they are thinking and feeling. You might say, "I know you're feeling \_\_\_\_\_. I'm feeling \_\_\_\_\_, too." Write down your feelings and things you might say to your child.

Feelings: \_\_\_\_\_

What you will say to your child: \_\_\_\_\_

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Tell your child what to expect to prepare them for changes in their life or routine. Write down what will happen.

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Encourage your child to draw pictures or write stories. You might read an age-appropriate book to them. What are some other creative ways you can help your child adjust?

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Support groups and counseling can help your family if you require more support. Whom can you ask for help? What resources might support your family?

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You might spend a lot of time talking and listening. Occasionally do fun activities together. Play a game, do crafts together, bake cookies, or spend time at the park. What can you do?

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In what ways can you keep daily and weekly routines familiar and stable? What are some new routines or rituals you can implement?

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What are some small or minor decisions your child can be involved with? Be specific.

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise help you identify ways to help your child adjust to the changes associated with separation and divorce? Why or why not?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?