



Healthy Lifestyle

Children's health

Divorce is between adults — but the breakup of a marriage can have profound effects on children, too. Here's help presenting a united front to your child.

By [Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Divorce is stressful for the entire family. Your child might feel as if his or her world has turned upside down. But you can ease your child's adjustment by interacting responsibly with your spouse. Consider these practical tips for children and divorce.

Sit down with your child and, along with your spouse, explain that you are getting a divorce. Speak honestly and simply, but skip the ugly details. Admit that the experience will be sad.

Make sure your child understands that divorce is only between adults. Remind your child — repeatedly — that he or she did nothing to cause the divorce and that both of you love your child as much as ever.

Also tell your child's teacher, school counselor and doctor about the divorce. They can observe your child, keep you updated on any concerns and offer guidance.

Initially, your child might be most interested in concrete things. Where will I live? Do I need to change schools? Who will take me to swimming lessons? As you work out the terms of the divorce, maintain your child's routine as much as possible. Knowing what to expect will help your child feel more secure.

As the reality of the divorce settles in, you might expect a variety of reactions, including:

- **Children under two.** At this age, a child might respond by becoming irritable, clingy or waking up during the night.
- **Preschool-age children.** A preschool-age child might need extra help understanding that he or she didn't cause the divorce and that nothing he or she does can bring you and your ex-spouse back together. Boys might become aggressive or defiant toward their moms and girls might become insecure and distrusting of men.
- **School-age children.** At this age, children might express more anger. They might worry about what will happen to you and your spouse, look to assign blame and fantasize about you getting back together.
- **Adolescents.** An older child might act out, become depressed or worry that he or she will also get divorced someday. Teens might question their beliefs and consider risky behavior.

Encourage your child to share his or her feelings as openly as possible.

How your child adjusts after your divorce depends on how you and your ex-spouse communicate and cooperate with each other as parents. To show respect for your child's relationship with your ex-spouse:

- Don't speak badly about your ex-spouse in front of your child
- Don't force your child to choose sides
- Don't argue or discuss child support issues in front of your child
- Don't pump your child for information about the other parent
- Don't use your child as a pawn to hurt the other parent

It might be tempting to relax your parental rules while your child grieves the divorce, but this could lead to more insecurity. Children thrive on consistency, structure and routine — even if they insist on testing boundaries and limits. If your child shares time between two households, try to maintain similar rules in both homes.

You might feel so hurt by your divorce that you turn to your child for comfort, but that's not your child's role. For help sorting through your feelings, consider joining a divorce support group or seeking counseling. If you and your spouse needs help reaching decisions about your child during or after the divorce, consider using the services of a family or divorce mediator. Your child might also benefit from counseling, especially if he or she is showing signs of distress.

During a divorce, interacting with your spouse might be the last thing you want to do — but it's important. Your child needs both of you. Work out custody arrangements and other details with your child's best interests in mind. This will mean putting your child's needs ahead of your own wishes or desires.

Also, remember that a long custody battle will affect your child's mental health. Instead, help your child maintain a strong, loving relationship with the other parent as you work toward meeting common parenting goals. For your child, support from both parents might be the best tool for weathering the challenges of divorce.

References

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