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11 Rules for Helping Your Child Deal with Divorce

It's no shocker that the breakup of your marriage is tough on your kids. We'll show you how to lend comfort – not confusion – to an already difficult situation.

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Introduction

The scene plays out all too often. Sandy's 9-year-old daughter eagerly waits by the window, bags packed. But after 20 minutes, maybe an hour, it becomes obvious her father is not showing up -- again. She begins to cry. "He's not here because he doesn't love me!" she yells, then storms up to her room and slams the door. "It breaks my heart to see her so hurt," Sandy says. "I don't want to bad-mouth her father, but I can't explain his actions either. I feel helpless, and then I get angry. When I confront him and she hears us fighting, it makes an already bad situation worse. I have no idea what to do." When an ex is unreliable, it can be frustrating and painful for both you and your children. However, there are subtle ways in which the parent who has custody can disappoint the kids as well -- and even contribute to the other parent's lack of commitment. While you can't make your child's hurt go away, you can help him cope with the various disappointments [divorce](#) brings. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind.

1. Make it clear your child is loved.

When a parent regularly doesn't come through, kids assume that they are somehow to blame. If only they were more fun or better behaved, they believe, then surely their parent would want to be with them. As a result, self-esteem can plummet, notes Edward Teyber, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at California State University, San Bernadino, and author of *Helping Children Cope With Divorce*. You need to continually reassure your child that the other parent's lack of commitment has nothing to do with her "lovability." If, say, your daughter's father failed to show up, you might tell her, "Even adults make big mistakes, and sometimes they hurt the people they love. Canceling at the last minute -- even when he knows that the visit means so much to you -- is wrong. But it doesn't mean you're not loved."

2. Don't sugarcoat the situation.

If you make excuses for the other parent, it cuts off your child's chance to express himself. "If a parent cancels because of a bad cold but went to work that day with the same cold, it's important that your child feel free to voice his feelings," says

therapist M. Gary Neuman, creator of the Sandcastles Divorce Therapy Program and author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. Let your child vent without your criticizing or apologizing for the absent parent.

3. Have an alternate arrangement.

If your ex is often a no-show, have a backup plan whenever your child is supposed to see the parent. Whether it's a playdate or a special activity with you, a fun outing diverts the potential letdown. Agree on how long you'll wait for the pickup or the phone call, and then get on with your day. You might say, "Let's wait for half an hour, and if Mom isn't able to come, we'll head out to the mall." If Mom doesn't show, let your child know you can hear her disappointment without judgment ("I understand it may be sad when Mom doesn't come to get you on time"), and let your child respond.

4. Encourage your child to communicate.

You can persuade kids 10 and older to talk to the other parent about his lack of follow-through. "Expressing themselves gives kids a sense of empowerment and can help ease their frustration," Neuman says. "Even if nothing changes, your child will feel better knowing he made an effort to remedy the situation." Talk to your child about voicing disappointment without lashing out in anger. He might say: "I miss you," "It hurts my feelings when you cancel," or "I'm embarrassed when everyone's mom and dad is at the game but mine." If he's uncomfortable talking about the issue, suggest he send a letter or an e-mail.

5. Be willing to alter the visitation schedule.

"Of course, consistency is important, but some flexibility on your part can increase an ex's ability to come through," says David Knox, Ph.D., author of *The Divorced Dad's Survival Book: How to Stay Connected With Your Kids*. If certain days or times are continually missed, for example, you might say, "If Tuesday dinners aren't good, what would be better?"

6. Get others involved.

Attempt to include other reliable, caring adults in your child's life. Not only are devoted family members and friends role models your child can depend on, but their commitment takes pressure off you.

7. Don't fight in front of your kids -- period.

Heated conversations regarding unreliability or finances should take place on the phone when your kids aren't around. Research has found that the most poorly adjusted kids of [divorce](#) are those exposed to ongoing parental battles. "No one is saying you have to be best friends," Dr. Teyber says. "Some couples simply can't get along or trust each other and aren't likely to. But for your children's sake, you must stop fighting in front of them."

8. Aim for peaceful transitions.

Even if you're not openly argumentative, kids can sense tension and become anxious themselves. According to Dr. Knox, research shows that many fathers avoid visiting their children simply because running into their exes becomes too much of an ordeal. "Some dads complain that they just can't handle the conflict when seeing their former spouse," he says. "Or a dad arrives to a clearly anxious child and assumes his ex has been bad-mouthing him. The father ends up rationalizing that it's better if he doesn't come at all." No matter how upset or angry you feel, be civil. If you truly can't, it might be best for your ex to collect your child from neutral ground -- at a friend's, at school, or at a McDonald's -- and you can leave for your car when you see him drive in.

9. Say goodbye with a smile.

When your child does go off to be with the other parent, make it clear that you're happy she's spending time with him. Mothers can unconsciously make their child feel guilty about leaving. "If a child sees her mom is upset when it's time for her to leave, she won't be able to have a good time with her father," Dr. Teyber says. Let your child know she doesn't need to worry about you. This will help your ex feel less tense about pickups too.

10. Send the right welcome-home message.

Parents are often unsure what to say when their kids come home from an ex's house. They don't want to seem disinterested, yet they're concerned about appearing too inquisitive. To play it safe, they may say nothing. "This silence unconsciously sends the message that you're either unhappy, disapproving, or uncomfortable with the time he spent with his other parent," Neuman says. "Or it makes the child feel as if the visit has betrayed you in some way." How to best handle their return? Pretend your kids came home from a weekend at their grandparents' house. Be interested and supportive.

11. Allow kids to express disappointment.

Don't downplay your child's pain and sadness. While done with the best intentions, telling kids comforting things like "It's better this way" and "Don't worry, everything will be fine" sends the message that you can't deal with your child's unhappiness, or worse, that he shouldn't feel that way. "Whether he's upset about the divorce in general or about something more specific, like a parent's having to work late again, anger and disappointment are normal, healthy emotional reactions," Neuman says. "A child is entitled to these feelings and should be able to talk about them without worrying that his parents will be upset or angry." Offer your support and comfort by letting your child know you understand -- and that his feelings matter. "Then he'll be free to confront disappointment rather than avoid it," Neuman says. "This will serve him well throughout his life."