

Activities for Helping Children Deal with Divorce

The process of divorce is a challenging life transition for both parents and children. During a divorce, children often feel a variety of conflicting emotions. Parents should provide their children with understanding and support. This guide aims to help parents support their children and help them work through their feelings, concerns and frustrations regarding the divorce.

Drawing pictures

Anger, sadness, worry, relief, confusion, guilt, embarrassment, loneliness and nervousness — these are all common emotions that children experience when their parents divorce. Many children have difficulty expressing such feelings in words, but drawing pictures can be an easier way for them to express how they truly feel. This process helps children express themselves in a positive manner and lets parents know what their children think and how they feel about the divorce. After your child has drawn a picture, ask specific questions about the drawing. Encourage them to explain what they have drawn and why, and be positive and supportive:

- What does divorce look like?
- How does divorce make you feel?
- Draw pictures of various feelings, such as anger, sadness or loneliness.
- Draw a picture of your family, including anyone you feel is part of your family. Write each person's name by their picture.
- Draw a picture of the homes you live in.
- If a genie could grant you one wish related to your family, what would you wish for? Draw a picture of your wish.

Start a conversation

Following divorce, parents and children should keep the lines of communication open. Children often have many fears, worries and questions about the divorce. If they

FOCUS on Kids

This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children. We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.

feel comfortable talking with their parents about these issues, they will likely have an easier adjustment to the changes divorce brings. However, children might not always know how to express their feelings or put their questions into words. Good conversations can occur in a wide variety of settings: during dinner, in the car, at bedtime or on walks. Discuss these questions with your children to help them talk through

their feelings about the divorce:

- How has your life changed since the divorce?
- Why do you think people get married?
- Why do you think people get divorced?
- What is a happy family like?
- Who do you talk with about the divorce?
- What good has come from the divorce?
- What do you worry about?
- What do you think your life will be like in five years?
- What good qualities does each of your parents have?
- If you could change anything about your life, what would you make different?

Communicating from a distance

Coping with divorce often becomes more difficult for children when one parent moves a considerable distance away. In addition to the effects of the divorce, they must also adjust to not seeing that parent as often. These tips can help parents and children maintain strong relationships over long distances:

- Email each other. Email is a fast, convenient way to keep in touch.
- Start a postcard club. Everyone likes to receive mail, and it only takes a few minutes to fill out a postcard. Give some stamped cards to your child, and take turns sending a card each week.
- Have weekly or monthly phone dates. Set a specific time to talk on the phone to give both of you something to look forward to.
- Create a shared journal. Buy an inexpensive notebook and write your thoughts and feelings in it. Exchange the notebook when you see each other.
- Create a family website. This is a great way to share information and pictures with each other.

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- Exchange audio or video recordings. Hearing or seeing each other, whether for special occasions or just during daily activities, strengthens the bond between you.

Letter writing

Writing letters is a constructive way to deal with confusing feelings and to blow off steam. Encourage your child to write a letter to one or both parents, expressing their feelings about the divorce. Tell them to write whatever they feel like. Assure them that they don't have to send the letters if they don't want to. The act of putting feelings and ideas in writing often helps put the situation in perspective.

Exercise

Engaging in physical activities together helps parents and children spend time with one another and reap the health benefits of exercise. Exercising is a healthy way to get rid of tension or angry feelings in a positive way. These are some activities that parents and children can enjoy together:

- Swimming
- Biking
- Hiking
- Walking
- Camping
- Flying kites
- Rollerblading

Play together

As with drawing pictures, play is often a good way to help children express their feelings when it is difficult to talk about them. The following are some ideas of effective activities:

- Make puppets. Create finger puppets or puppets out of brown paper sacks. Have the puppets talk about their feelings.
- Play games. Sometimes when people are occupied with another activity, it is easier to talk about feelings than if they just sit down to have a talk. There are even some games that specifically address divorce.
- Role-play. Practice dealing with difficult situations that arise during divorce by acting out scenarios and discussing ways these situations can be handled positively.

The power of stories

Many children's books address the topic of divorce. Reading such books with your child can be a valuable way to help them work through the feelings and concerns they're facing regarding the divorce. Children often identify with characters in books. Discussing how characters work through their challenges can give your child insight into his situation. For a list of recommended books, refer to MU Extension publications GH6613, *Helping Preschoolers and*

Elementary-Age Children Adjust to Divorce, and GH6616, *Helping Preteens and Adolescents Adjust to Divorce*.

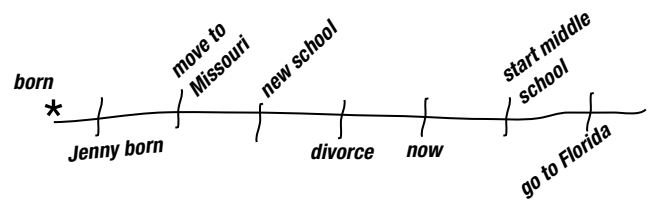
Writing stories

Many children write and illustrate stories. If your child enjoys this kind of activity, suggest that they write a story about divorce. Encourage your child to be as creative as possible and to draw pictures that help illustrate the story. If your child is willing, have them share their story with you. Be sure to be positive and supportive of their work.

Personal history timeline

One common feeling children experience after a divorce is worry about the future. They might be concerned about what is going to happen to them and if their lives will ever be normal again. Creating a timeline can help children put the events of their lives in perspective. It can help them see that they have experienced many good things in the past, and that they have many years ahead of them to have fun and happy times with their families. Younger children need help with this activity but might enjoy thinking of events for their parent to put on their timeline. Discuss your child's timeline with them when they finish. Point out that they have experienced many different events in life, some good and some bad. Help them understand they can get through the difficult time of divorce and that there are good times ahead.

Directions for a personal history timeline



- Draw a long horizontal line on a sheet of paper.
- Label your birth at one end with a star.
- Label the present time somewhere in the middle.
- Mark significant events that have occurred in your life between the "birth" star and the "now" mark. Possible ideas include births of siblings, getting pets, starting school, moving, learning to read or ride a bike, divorce, remarriage, joining a team or club, deaths of relatives, and special holidays and vacations.
- Mark events that you hope will happen in the future.

Creating two comfortable homes

Your child should feel comfortable both in your home and in the home of your former spouse. Ensure each home contains familiar items to help your child feel secure and at home in both places. If possible, work with your child's

other parent and include the following items in both households:

- Favorite toys and games
- Basic school supplies (paper, pencils, scissors, etc.)
- Clothing (underwear, socks, pajamas, jeans, etc.)
- Toiletries (toothbrush, hair brush, deodorant, etc.)
- Favorite foods
- Photos of all family members

Parent information cards

Make information cards for you, your child and the other parent. With this card, you, your child and your child's other parent always know how to contact each other. Write information about yourself on one side of a large index card, and put information about your child's other parent on the other side:

- Name
- Addresses (home and work)
- Phone numbers (home and work)
- Days the child lives with this parent
- Things they like to do together

Time capsule

Making a time capsule is another way of helping children recognize that the troublesome feelings surrounding the divorce won't last forever and that there are many things to look forward to. Have your child put things in the capsule that represent his life, such as stories, drawings, photographs, and other special treasures and reminders. Encourage your child to answer the following questions and include them in the time capsule:

- Who are your friends?
- Who is part of your family now?
- Who will be part of your family in the future?
- Where will you be living in one year? Five years?
- What kinds of things do you like to do?
- What would you like to learn how to do in the future?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?

Many kinds of containers make good time capsules — large glass jars with tight lids, large manila envelopes,

shoeboxes or drawstring bags. After your child has finished making the time capsule, help them seal it. Let them decide when they will open it. For example, it might be opened in one year, on a certain birthday or five years from the divorce. When the time comes to open the capsule, your child will undoubtedly have fun looking at the things they put in it, noticing how their handwriting has changed and reading what they wrote.

Conclusion

Divorce is a difficult adjustment for children and parents. All family members must deal with a wide variety of emotions and change the way they live. Despite their own struggles in the divorce process though, parents still have an obligation to provide their children with love, nurturing and a sense of stability. Relationship-building activities can help parents connect with their children and better understand their children's feelings and concerns. With time, patience and creativity, children and parents can successfully work through the effects of divorce together.

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ALSO FROM MU EXTENSION PUBLICATIONS

- GH6607 Helping Infants and Toddlers Adjust to Divorce*
GH6613 Helping Preschoolers and Elementary-Age Children Adjust to Divorce
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