

# Helping Preteens and Adolescents Adjust to Divorce

The process of divorce and separation is stressful for parents and adolescent children alike. In adolescence, children experience drastic physical, emotional, mental and social changes. These changes are largely affected by the circumstances of their environments, such as the divorce of their parents. Many preteens and adolescents respond similarly to this family situation. However, some of their thoughts and reactions differ because of adolescents' higher cognitive abilities and greater likelihood of already experiencing the effects of puberty.

At this age, children are also involved in school-based and extracurricular activities. They might pick up new hobbies, such as a greater interest in music or spending time with friends. These are often difficult transitions for parents and children, and divorce makes them more complex. Even so, children of various ages tend to adjust to divorce with time.

Preteens and adolescents have some common reactions to their parents' divorce and separation. Co-parents can learn how to work together to promote positive adjustment among their children.

## Preteens and young adolescents (ages 11 to 13)

At this age, children can understand the meaning of and reasons for divorce better than younger children. Their higher cognitive abilities allow them to understand time, consider future plans and schedules, and learn to accommodate different rules at each home. However, they might become depressed or blame themselves for their parents' separation.

Preteens and young adolescents of divorce sometimes try to conceal their disappointment or distress. They might act as if they do not miss the other parent when they actually wish they could spend more time with them. This response might be an attempt to not upset or offend the parent they see more often. Some preteens and young adolescents react

## 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.*

by being willing or feeling obligated to physically help their parents. For example, they might help out more around each home to relieve their parents' added stress.

In other cases, children of this age might struggle to accept the reality of the breakup. Some act out in frustration and anger, using bad language. Unlike younger children, they are completely aware that this behavior is inappropriate. In extreme

cases, they might become rebellious by getting involved in substance use and delinquency to cope with the family breakup. Preteens and young teens might also side with one parent and refuse to spend time with the other. Children might feel more attached to the custodial parent, feel abandoned by the noncustodial parent or favor disciplinary practices of one parent.

At 11 to 13 years old, children increasingly value independence from parents and more time with friends. They are trying to identify who they are and where they fit in, but their parents remain a source of emotional support. Divorce and separation can interfere with these processes. Research shows that preteens and young adolescents might be afraid to be more independent if they think their parents are leaving permanently. This might lead children to rely too much on their parents or to choose to spend excessive amounts of time alone. They might then develop fewer friendships, poorer school grades, lower self-esteem and poor social skills — all of which are harmful to adolescent development.

## Older adolescents (ages 14-18)

Children between 14 and 18 years old are quite similar to younger teens in understanding and handling the divorce process. Their improved judgment and intellectual abilities allow them to make sense of their parents' breakup. They also understand changes caused by divorce, including organizing schedules and balancing rules between homes. However, adolescents still experience great distress during this process.

Teens' emotional reactions to divorce vary depending on the situation. Some feel helpless and depressed, blaming themselves for the divorce. To avoid feeling upset or offending the custodial parent, teens might pretend they do not care about the noncustodial parent despite really

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missing them. Other children might blame one or both parents. They might feel abandoned by the noncustodial parent or favor the disciplinary practices of one parent over another. As a result, they might side with the parent they feel more attached to and refuse to visit the other parent.

Some adolescents of divorce feel a sense of growing up faster than normal due to living in single-parent homes. They worry about how divorce affects their financial situation or feel obligated to help out with household chores, care for younger siblings and take on other family responsibilities. This worry can prevent teens from establishing their independence and distract from social, school and work activities. It can hinder teens from developing an identity separate from family. Research shows that when teens' needs are not respected by parents, they are likely to act out in frustration, anger and resentment. They might also join peer groups that engage in delinquent acts, substance use and sexually risky behaviors. This is especially common among teens who get limited parental guidance.

Some teens might stay dependent on their parents instead of developing their own identity. Others might stray from their parents and avoid talking to them. Adolescents might feel unsure about their beliefs concerning romantic relationships, which might lead to lower self-esteem and worse performance in school as they struggle to maintain and build relationships with friends and romantic partners.

Teens want to prove they are capable of making their own decisions. They might even feel intolerant of their parents' problems with divorce. However, they still need parental support to continue developing as healthy adolescents.

## Mixed emotions

Teens might be more likely than younger children to experience mixed emotions in response to their parents' divorce and separation. It is common for them to feel hurt, upset, sad, angry and relieved all at once. Mixed emotions are especially likely if teens knew their parents were unhappy together in the first place. Specifically, adolescents might feel hurt and sad about the absence of the noncustodial parent but also feel relieved by their parents' separation for the reduction in conflict.

Despite feeling glad that their parents argue less, they might also be angry and resent having to help more with family chores at each household. Teens are capable of recognizing the positive and negative consequences of divorce. Adolescents undergo physical, mental and emotional changes, which help explain teens' mixed emotions about divorce.

This situation can be highly stressful for teens to handle by themselves. They might turn to peers to help them during this time. However, some may choose peer groups that resort to substance use, sexually risky behavior or delinquent acts to cope with mixed emotions. Teens might also engage in these behaviors to avoid rejection by this group, as many already worry about rejection by peers

because of their family's divorce. This might cause them to compare themselves to other teens' family circumstances.

Regardless, some teens have better relationships with both parents as time passes after the divorce. Many build stronger bonds with parents separately if they are prompted to do so. That's why it is crucial for parents to restore or strengthen their relationships with their children over time.

## Helping children adjust to separation and divorce

Preteens and adolescents need open communication with both parents about the changes that come with separation and divorce. Open communication can help them understand what to expect while giving them the right to express their thoughts and feelings.

Parents might want to clarify to their children that they disagree about their own lives but not about their children. It is important for parents to work together to ensure they are doing what is best for their children. Parents should consider keeping these things in mind when communicating with their children:

- Discuss new changes in the family.
- Allow them to safely express their anger, frustrations, and other feelings.
- Encourage them to ask questions.
- Tell them the truth about whether you will get back together with your spouse.
- Encourage them to build and strengthen their relationship with the other parent.
- Let them know they do not have to choose between parents.
- Include them in decisions that affect their lives, but let them know you have the final authority in these decisions.
- Coordinate with children how they want to celebrate birthdays and other meaningful occasions.
- Give them chores or responsibilities they can handle, keeping in mind their school, extracurricular and visitation schedules.
- Express appreciation when they help out with household chores or other family responsibilities.
- Provide regular affection and support.

Preteens also want both parents to take an interest in their lives. They often feel comforted and reassured by their parents' efforts to stay involved that their parents still care about them. There are a number of other steps parents can take to encourage healthy development:

- Maintain predictable, flexible schedules to adjust to changes in children's social lives and extracurricular activities.
- Provide careful monitoring of where children go and who they will be with.
- Be supportive of their need to be with friends and encourage them to spend more time with friends that are a positive influence.
- Use effective, age-appropriate discipline practices when they break rules.

- Attend their games, recitals, award ceremonies and other important events.
- Inform adults involved in the children's lives about your family circumstances. These adults include teachers, counselors, coaches, doctors and other important figures.
- Model appropriate behaviors for them. They need to learn proper interactions and healthy behaviors for romantic relationships and independent responsibilities.

Finally, it is crucial for parents to confide in adults their own age rather than their children. This can be difficult to avoid, because teenagers are often more capable of understanding and relating to relationship issues. Even though children of this age often seek to be treated as adults, they are still too young to be a parent's confidant.

## Communicating as co-parents

Common methods of communication for co-parents include phone, text, email or face-to-face interactions. Depending on the situation, parents might prefer one method over another, or it might be the only convenient way to contact each other. Effective co-parenting requires regular cooperative communication between parents. Thus, it is important for parents to agree on a method that works for both of them.

When there is conflict and lack of cooperation between parents, children often feel fear and stress. They might begin to view their relationships with each parent in different ways. If conflict persists, children might have a distorted understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like, which can be harmful as they begin to explore and develop romantic relationships of their own.

By working together, co-parents can help their children develop appropriate ideas of positive functioning relationships. Co-parents should consider these communication tips to help preteens and adolescents adjust to divorce:

- **Use ex-etiquette communication.** Discuss co-parenting details in a calm, friendly and pleasant manner. Listen patiently when the other parent is speaking. Demonstrate your understanding and respect for their opinions and suggestions.
- **Avoid putting your children in the middle.** Communicate directly with the other parent instead of using your children as messengers.
- **Discuss and argue in a constructive manner.** Try to reduce tension during arguments. Let anger, frustration and other emotions unravel in a healthy, gradual way. Use I messages, such as "I worry when you don't contact me to confirm you are picking up the children." Avoid name-calling and blaming the other parent.
- **Resolve conflict.** Apologize or work out issues to settle disputes. Perform this action in front of children so they can observe positive conflict resolution.
- **Exchange all information involving your children.** Include the other parent and your children in any decision-making affecting the children. Discuss school, college choices, extracurricular activities, camps and other relevant concerns. Exchange report cards, photos and other items about your children. Coordinate schedules between visits to agree on transition times, even if children can drive themselves.
- **Keep the topic on co-parenting.** Focus on what is important for your children. Express appreciation for the other parent's contributions to parenting decisions and for taking an interest in children's lives.
- **Be positive.** A co-parenting relationship requires cooperation, communication and a positive attitude.

## Transitions, holidays and vacations

Transitions between homes are usually not as stressful for preteens and adolescents as they are for younger children. Preteens and adolescents can handle longer separations and might even be able to drive themselves to and from each home, which minimizes how often parents would see each other. Even so, it is best not to let too much time pass between visits. Children and parents need time to maintain strong bonds and reconnect in meaningful ways.

Brief transitions often ease tension between parents, allowing for more calm and cooperative interactions. Adolescents benefit from regular, predictable visitation schedules, but allow some flexibility in schedules to accommodate children's involvement in various activities. Transitioning from one parent to the other should be done promptly and on schedule. Furthermore, research shows teens and adolescents of divorce adjust better when both parents are reassuring about the transition. Consistent reminders of their parents' love and support tend to help children settle in to each home environment.

Children around this age might wonder what vacations and holidays will be like after divorce. To avoid conflict, parents might want to discuss their availability before scheduling important family celebrations and vacation times into their parenting plan. In addition to major religious and cultural holidays, birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day are also special celebrations to work into schedules. Above all, adolescents benefit if they do not feel they have to choose between parents or activities such as vacations or holidays.

## Introducing new adults

It is common after divorce for parents to begin developing relationships with new people. These relationships affect preteens and adolescents of divorce in various ways.

In some situations, children might enjoy having another adult role model around, especially when it makes their parent happy. Even so, preteens and adolescents can react negatively to new adults. Children might experience several different emotions when a parent begins to date:

- Mixed feelings about their parent's dating and how to behave with the new partner
- Hurt if they think their parent's new relationship will prevent their parents from getting back together
- Threatened by the idea of having to share their parent's attention
- Guilt over the other parent's feelings about a new partner
- Anger and frustration over feeling threatened, which might lead them to compete for the dating parent's attention or reject the new partner
- Worry about the new partner affects the other parent and about the future of this new relationship

Parents should reassure children of their love and that no one will come between them or replace the other parent.

Many divorced parents wonder how to explain their dating to their children. It is a good idea to mention the topic of dating after divorce to preteens, as they tend to already understand the meaning of dating. A parent can say, "I have a date with someone tomorrow night. I am curious to know how you feel about me dating." Note that phrasing the question this way does not ask permission to go out on dates, which would be inappropriate. The idea is for a parent to start up a conversation on the topic to reassure children that dating will not disrupt their time together.

As for adolescents, being honest about dating is crucial. A parent might say, "I'd like to start dating. It's been a while since the divorce, and I would like to meet new people. How does this make you feel?" It might be awkward for some adolescents to think about their parents dating, because this is when many adolescents are dating as well.

If the relationship becomes long-term, a parent can discuss with their new partner how to introduce them to their children. A parent should judge when it's best to tell their children. Children are more likely to benefit if introductions are held off until the relationship becomes serious. It is better to take things slow and wait to introduce a new partner until everyone is adjusted and ready.

## Conclusion

Separation and divorce are very stressful for preteens and adolescents. They are already dealing with complicated changes in school, their friends, work, extracurricular activities and puberty. Divorce can disrupt how children handle these life changes. Preteens and adolescents are also influenced by their parents' interactions and the contact they have with each parent.

By always putting their children's needs first, parents can become mature, responsible co-parents. Children need parents who can cooperate and communicate calmly with each other. Having both parents take an interest in their children's lives helps reassure them through the turbulent

process of divorce and separation. Furthermore, parents who provide structure while encouraging independence can help ease children's adjustment to divorce.

## Resources for children

- *Mom's House Dad's House for Kids: Feeling at Home in One Home or Two* — This tips and strategies workbook helps preteens and young adolescents handle new living arrangements, refrain from parents' arguments, manage mixed emotions, stay connected with parents and friends, and learn to appreciate new family circumstances.
- *Split in Two: Keeping it Together When Your Parents Live Apart* — This practical yet comical guide has strategies to help teens and preteens organize their busy lives to allow them to adjust to regular transitions between homes.
- *The Divorce Helpbook for Teens* — This warm and friendly guide helps teens understand why parents get divorced, how it changes their lives, what they can do to feel less depressed, and whom they can talk to about their concerns.

## Resource for parents

*Parenting apart: Effective co-parenting.* (2011). Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Tennessee Extension and Tennessee State Cooperative Extension Service.

## References

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## Related MU Extension publications

- GH6130 *Developing a Parenting Plan: A Guide for Divorcing Parents*
- NCR118 *Living With Your Teenager: Understanding Physical Changes*
- NCR120 *Living With Your Teenager: Understanding Emotional Changes*