



L A K E F R O N T
W E L L N E S S C E N T E R , S . C .

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Abundant Living... Discover the Possibilities!

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DIVORCE

Children and Divorce

Many families in the United States are touched by divorce. The current divorce rate is calculated to be between 40 and 60% for those recently married and up to 10% higher for remarriages. A majority of divorces occur in families with children under the age of 18.

Divorce propels adults and children into numerous adjustments and challenges. While great diversity exists in children's adjustment to divorce, and a majority of children weather the transition and become competent adults, up to a quarter of children whose parents divorce experience ongoing emotional and behavior difficulties (as compared to 10% of children whose parents do not divorce).

Spouses divorce each other, but they do not divorce their children. A majority of former spouses are able to establish a relatively conflict-free parenting relationship for the benefit of their children. However, about a third have difficulty in establishing a workable parenting relationship, even years after the divorce.

In her research on divorcing parents, family therapist Constance Ahrons identified different types of post-divorce parenting relationships: "perfect pals," "cooperative colleagues," "angry associates," "fiery foes," and "dissolved duos." However, even when parents are "angry associates" or "fiery foes," there are ways they can develop cooperative or business-like relationships for the sake of their children. Parental conflict can hinder children's adjustment and good coparenting skills are very important to a child's adjustment.

Most parents who have a difficult relationship with their ex-spouse but who want to coparent start out with "parallel parenting." In this arrangement, each parent assumes total responsibility for the children during the time they are together; there is no expectation of flexibility and little contact with the other parent. As time goes on and anger dissipates, parents may develop some version of "cooperative parenting." In this arrangement, parents communicate directly and in a business-like manner regarding the children and coparenting schedules. Marriage and family therapists can be helpful to families as they formulate or define their post-divorce parenting relationships.

How can you help your children?

- Tell children about the divorce together, if possible.
- Answer children's questions honestly, avoiding unnecessary details.
- Reassure children they are not to blame for divorce.
- Tell children they are loved and will be taken care of.
- Include the other parent in school and other activities.
- Be consistent and on time to pick up and return children.
- Develop a workable parenting plan that gives children access to both parents.
- Guard against canceling plans with children.
- Give children permission to have a loving, satisfying relationship with other parent.



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Avoid putting children in the middle and in the position of having to take sides.
Avoid pumping children for information about the other parent.
Avoid arguing and discussing child support issues in front of children.
Avoid speaking negatively about the other parent or using the child as a pawn to hurt the other parent.

How do you know when to seek help?

When your children show signs of stress:

acts younger than their chronological age
fear of being apart from parent(s)
moodiness
acting out
manipulation
sadness and depression
guilt
sleep or eating problems
change in personality
academic and peer problems
irrational fears and compulsive behavior

When you or your partner begins to:

use the legal system to fight with each other
put down or badmouth the other parent
use the children as message carriers or to spy on the other parent (children feel caught in the middle)
experience high levels of conflict and children repeatedly try to stop the fighting
rely on the children for high level of emotional support and major responsibilities in the home
experience depression or anxiety

What help is available for divorcing parents and children?

Court-connected divorce education programs for parents and children.

Programs for parents and, sometimes, children are recommended or required in over half of the counties in the United States. Call your local family court for more information.

School programs for children.

Some school systems offer small groups for children during the day or after school. In these groups children learn that they are not alone in their experience of divorce and learn coping strategies.

Family therapy (available through public and private mental health centers, university family therapy centers).

During separation and divorce, family members experience uncertainty, emotional upheaval, and changes in their family roles and rules. Family therapists can assist in the process of redefining relationships and addressing family members' responsibilities and needs.



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Resources

Many resources exist for adults, parents, and children who wish to learn more about the process of separation and divorce. In particular, numerous books exist for children at varying reading levels. A few books for parents are mentioned; check libraries and bookstores for other titles.

Books

Ahrons, C. R. (1994). *The good divorce: Keeping your family together when your marriage comes apart*. New York: HarperCollins. The point of the Ahrons book is not that divorce is good, but that there is such a thing as a good divorce, in which couples part without destroying each other and their children. She concludes that about 50% of couples had cooperative coparental relationships one year post-divorce.

Blau, M. (1993). *Families apart: Ten keys to successful co-parenting*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. This book focuses on what separating parents need to know if they are thinking about coparenting. Blau identifies ten "keys" to good parenting after a divorce; chapters are organized around these keys. Blau lists many resources for parents and age-appropriate books for children.

Everett, C., & Everett, S. V. (1994). *Healthy divorce*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. This book describes 14 stages of adjustment from marital erosion through separation, mediation, and remarriage. Helpful ideas given for coparenting and mediating.

Gold, L. (1992). *Between love and hate: A guide to civilized divorce*. New York: Plenum Press. This hands-on guide to the divorce process provides assessments and exercises that help parents learn to resolve conflict, improve communication, and avoid costly legal battles.

Lansky, V. (1991). *Vicki Lansky's divorce book for parents*. New York: Signet. This inexpensive paperback book is a comprehensive guide that includes such topics as: telling the children, talking with your ex-spouse, dealing with support payments, dating, sex and the single parent, knowing when to get professional help, and handling holidays.

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