

# Children and Divorce

©2006 Deanne Carter, LMHC, NCC

Of course, you did your best to make it work, and you might feel like you failed yourself and your children. That doesn't have to be the case. Studies show that there are ways to minimize the psychological and sociological effects. Now more than ever, your children need you to take care of your own emotional health, and be aware of their needs.

Children of all ages are stressed when they witness parents being upset. This can be healthy modeling that emotions are normal and can be managed, or kids can feel vulnerable and experience a diminished sense of security and protection from parents.

Some children actually become caretakers, setting aside their own emotions, stuffing or denying their own needs; to do what they think is best for their parents. A common mistake parents make is to turn to their children to fill an emotional void. It can be subtle, and kids will undoubtedly put a parents needs before their own because their survival depends on you being emotionally stable.

Anger and hostility is often present and it is tempting for parents to seek their children as allies, asking what the other parent said or did. Even when it's about what seems like neutral situations, kids feel torn.

## What can you do?

1. The best message you can give to your children is that you are always available to talk. That may mean that you put your own needs aside for the moment and put your full attention on your child. Validating how they feel and that you understand what they are communicating is most of it! You do not have to have answers, explanations, or try to fix it. Just "get" what they say and they will feel supported and encouraged to continue sharing with you.
2. It is better when parents live close enough that children can consistently attend their activities or visits with friends. If that is not possible, then provide as much prevention as possible by having two sets of toys, school supplies, bedtime routine items, etc so that your child's routines can be as undisrupted as possible. You may not like that idea of reading for 20 minutes a night or that your child sleeps with a stuffed animal still, but what matters is that their routines are disrupted as little as possible.
3. Keep your negotiating between the adults, rather than putting kids in the middle. Parents should discuss homework routines, schedule changes, and coordination of visits between them. Most children become very distressed when they are messengers. They watch all of your subtle cues and take them on as something they are responsible for fixing. The best way to avoid burdening your children is to keep communication between the two of you, even if that means hiring a mediator or writing notes.

4. Children need to hear that they are not to blame. They are egocentric and often think that the world revolves around them. Well, that is helpful when they are dreaming they can do anything they want in life, however, it is not helpful when they take on the burdens of the world, as well.
5. It is important that they are not encouraged to think one parent is bad. Their loyalty is to each of you. You might use the analogy of some friends get along better than others, and sometimes you choose not to hang out with someone because you like different things or you don't agree with each other, but that doesn't make them bad. Children's identity is still wrapped up in their parents. If you make the other parent bad, you are on some ego level, making your child bad.
6. Kids need to know that they are not the only ones. With divorce rates being about 50%, kids need to be informed that even though it's not usually a topic for discussion, that there are many make ups of families and this is one of them.
7. It's important for kids to have special activities with each parent, whenever possible. Even better, when it's a predictable event, kids have more of a sense of belonging that is often lost with divorce. A monthly breakfast date, bike ride, or game night goes a long way. When the other parent is not available, it is helpful for kids to have other healthy adults in their life. It can help them regain trust of adults, and give you important alone time. Kids need love from many sources, and you need rejuvenation time.
8. If or when you get to the point of entering into new relationships, it is important to move slowly and give kids time to adjust. They can learn to trust new adults, and may have lots of questions. Let those questions be your guide and remember to validate feelings, even if you don't have answers or cannot honor their wishes (one common one is to get back together with mom/dad and don't date anyone). Girls particularly, can have a hard time when their mothers remarry since they tend to be more attached. They might resent having someone intrude on their time and attention. The more sources of love and belonging your children have, the more they will be able to adapt to sharing you.

Divorce is not easy on anyone. It can be very difficult to coordinate support of your children with your ex-spouse. Therefore, it is essential for you to focus on what strategies you have control over and to do your best to provide the most stability and encouragement you can for your children.

**If you're experiencing divorce and would like support for your family during the transition, please contact me.**