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DEALING WITH DIVORCE: How to Help Your Children Cope with Divorce

Divorce can be difficult for all involved. It involves changes that children may not quite understand. Very often divorce means children may no longer frequently see one parent, may involve a move to another home or new school, or feel isolated from parents who are dealing with the effects of divorce themselves. In addition to the emotional effects from divorce, children may see the results of financial constraints resulting from dropping to a single parent income. Often times a parent who previously stayed home, finds it necessary to return to the workforce outside of the home. All these changes can be quite traumatic. Combined with physical change, may be negative feelings associated with the divorce and its effect on them.

Though it's easy for parents to be overwhelmed themselves with feelings about the divorce, it's important to remember your children are also reacting, and will need your time and support during the difficult times. Children often feel confused, guilty, angry, and/or scared for a period of time after finding out that their parents are divorcing. These feelings are natural. Parents will want to talk to their children about what is, or what will be happening, while reassuring them that they are not to blame.

Some reactions children may feel during a divorce include:

- Feelings of guilt that they are to blame, that somehow if they had behaved better, been more loving, or an easier child their parents wouldn't have as many troubles.
- Feelings of fear. Fear can be related to the thought of possibly being abandoned, changes in financial status following the divorce, threat or reality of moving to a new home or school, fears of never seeing a non-custodial parent again, concerns about how they will interact with both parents, or who they will live with.
- Feelings of anger that their parents were not able to keep the family together or at themselves for being "bad" and driving mom and dad to divorce. They may feel that life is unfair or that they are being punished for something. Anger might be directed at the parents, at school, or be expressed as general negative feelings. Children may become more aggressive, uncooperative, or perhaps withdrawn as they try to adjust to the changes.
- Feelings of confusion. Especially younger children may not really understand what divorce means. They may not understand that divorce usually means that mom and dad do not get back together ever. Confusion can also arise if the parents have separated and re-united in the past or if the child believes that they might get back together.
- Feelings of desire for their parents to get back together. They may engage in "schemes" aimed at bringing their parents together. It can be upsetting if their plans don't work.
- Feelings of sadness. Children may feel sad over the loss of the family, unlovable, or may feel like they can't do anything right.

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Explaining Divorce to Children

There is no one right way to explain to your child that you are getting a divorce. Much of how you explain it depends on factors such as how old your children are, whether they already have a sense that divorce is coming (i.e., parents have separated in the past, there has been much fighting in the home, the child has asked questions about divorce, etc.), and individual thoughts and feelings that the children have about divorce. Remember that divorce is a process, not a single event. It is likely that you won't be able to have one conversation with your children and get every issue out in the open and resolved. Be prepared for your children to have questions/concerns or behaviors for up to a year or more after. Regardless of how you tell your children about divorce, some things should be stated many times (during and after the divorce process) to all children in order to make them feel safe, supported and loved.

- Be honest, to an age appropriate level. Let your child know about changes in visitation, living arrangements, etc. Children need simple, straightforward answers without feeling like they or either parent is “bad”. Use words that your child will be able to understand.
- Listen to your child. He/she is likely to have questions related to the divorce and how it will affect them. It's important to give your child time to talk about their thoughts/feelings without interrupting. Whenever possible, have both parents available to talk to children. Be prepared to answer questions such as:
 - Who will I live with?
 - Will I ever see my other parent?
 - Will we have to move?
 - Why did this happen?
 - I thought marriage was supposed to last forever?
 - Is it my fault?
 - If I am good will you get back together?
- Frequently tell your child how much you love them, and that the divorce is not their fault.. **Make sure you spend time with them during and after the divorce process.**
- Children will feel better if parents can be cordial with one another. Pressure to “choose sides,” or negative comments made about the other parent only adds to the difficulty of adjusting to divorce.
- Reassure them that they are not going to be abandoned. These reassurances may need to be repeated frequently.
- Avoid trying to give a “quick fix” to the problem. Children need to know that they will get through the divorce, but that their parents understand that it may be difficult for them.
- Whenever possible let your child know that both their parents will still be involved in their lives and see them often. However, do not say this if it won't be possible. Parents don't want to give their children false hope.