

Notes for Parents

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While we often think of divorce as traumatic for children, especially young children, it doesn't have to be. Careful planning and communication can help reduce the negative effects of your divorce. Recent research has shown that children need both parents actively involved fully in their lives. Continuity of relationships is more important than geographic continuity, and both parents can support your child's adjustment by participating in their academic, social, extracurricular, and emotional lives. Your children will also benefit if they can be free of direct exposure to your own conflict and if they have a consistent and healthy daily routine in each of your homes, regardless of the parenting schedule that you set up. This book is designed for children aged four to eight. Children in that age range are quite concrete. They have difficulty understanding abstract concepts that are vague to them. Their sense of time concepts is developing, but not yet at the same level as older children, so they may not understand concepts like every other day or every other weekend. When you talk with them about your schedule, be concrete and use calendars with colors or letters to designate whose house they will be at.

Similarly, their understanding of emotions is quite concrete. They don't have adult logic, and it's often difficult to explain to them why they are scared, or sad, or confused. Many children don't want to talk about their feelings because they are angry, and they fear that, if they talk about their angry feelings, their anger will somehow get out of control. Many young children experience "magical thinking," in which they fear that, if they talk about or think about certain bad things, the bad thing might come true. You can help your child handle her feelings in a way that is safe and comforting by acknowledging her feelings and reassuring her that you'll be there for her. In the beginning, your divorce and the changes will likely be confusing and sad to your child. Many children believe they've caused their parents' divorce, especially if they've ever secretly wished for the divorce to end the conflicts and fighting they've been exposed to. Reassure them that, not only did they not cause it, but you think it's the best thing for the family in the long-term. Constantly tell them you love them and that you'll be there for them. Give extra hugs, attention, and affection during this time. They need the comfort and reassurance that their feelings are understood and acceptable to you.

You can expect your child to show signs of many feelings. These may include guilt (they were responsible for the divorce or didn't do enough to prevent it), sadness (they miss the family structure and want you back together), loneliness (they may withdraw from others to hide their feelings), anger (they're mad that you got divorced), confusion (they don't know what to expect and don't know what to believe), or fear (will my parents leave me like they left each other, will I have to move, or will I still get to take piano lessons). Some children feel relief if there's a significant reduction in your parental conflict and if they know you'll both stay involved in their lives. Many children experience small regressions, in which they

have toileting accidents, play with toys meant for younger children, use immature language, or need to sleep with you. Help them understand that all of these feelings and responses are normal, and that you understand them.

Talk to your children about their feelings and use your own feelings as a guide. For example, you might ask your child, "You seem more withdrawn than you used to be. Are you afraid of anything? I know that when I'm afraid, I sometimes like to be by myself, but I've learned that talking about my feelings helps me feel better." If you see your child crying, give him a hug, tell him it's ok to cry because he's feeling sad, and let him know that most children feel sad when parents divorce. Tell him that you sometimes feel sad too, reassure him that it's not his fault, and let him know that you feel better after you cry and talk to someone about your own sad feelings. Use this book, and other similar books, as a way to introduce some of these feelings, including the feeling that many children don't want to talk about their feelings. Again, reassure your child that talking about bad feelings doesn't make bad things happen.

At the same time, while it may be helpful to your children to hear you talk about your own feelings in general terms and to know that it's helpful to talk about them, remember that they are not prepared to handle your emotional reactions to the stresses associated with the divorce. That might make them feel guilty or responsible for taking care of your feelings. Young children in particular are susceptible to this. Instead of talking with them about the details of your feelings, use adult supports to discuss your own feelings so that your children are free to focus on their own feelings and reactions.

At the same time, don't change your rules and expectations much. Help your child learn that she can't use your divorce as an excuse to fight with her peers or siblings, avoid school work, or have temper tantrums. Teach her to grow from her sad and confusing feelings and be proud of her when she handles her feelings in an appropriate way. Be available to listen to your child. Remember that she's most likely to want to talk when you make yourself available. She may talk at unusual moments, such as when you are in the car alone together, while you're making dinner, or even while playing a board game. Give her positive attention when she's expressing herself so that she doesn't need to "get in trouble" to get your attention.

When deciding to get a divorce, it's very helpful if both of you can talk to your children together about the decision to get divorced, just like the parents in this story. This reassures your children that you will continue to work together on their behalf, even though you're splitting up. By answering their immediate questions together, you can effectively show your children that you will try to resolve problems that relate to them. Over the first few weeks, you will want to have an opportunity to talk with your children individually and together many different times to be certain that they understand what divorce is and what it is not, and to reassure your children of your ongoing love and availability to them.

Over the next few months, focus on the divorce issues a little bit less and focus more on establishing new routines in each home. Help your children understand the schedule of parenting and work to make exchanges between the two of you child focused and peaceful. If it is difficult to avoid arguments in front of your children, use neutral sites, such as day-care or school, to drop off and pick up your children. Any additional regression you might have seen should be subsiding within three to four months. If regressions continue for longer than four months, you would want to talk with a therapist about how to help your child through this, especially if there continues to be significant conflict between you and your ex-spouse.

As time goes by, it can be helpful to periodically bring up your children's feelings and ask them if there are any questions or concerns. Encourage them to talk with you about the divorce, the changes, and their feelings. Continue to make sacrifices on behalf of your children, ensuring that their life changes as little as possible. Encourage them to take important objects between homes, and don't argue about who purchased them or who was responsible if accidentally left at the wrong house. Remember, your child's special things need to be with your child and it's your job to make sure that their important things (such as teddy bears, schoolwork, athletic equipment, etc.) are with them when they need them. If you avoid competition with each other, your children will adjust more easily. Keep in mind that, just because you have talked with them a few times about the divorce and their feelings, you will probably need to do so on a semi-regular basis. When your child is four years old, he won't understand things clearly, and he may need to ask new questions when he is six, eight, or ten. In the long run, continue to provide an environment that is nurturing, emotionally supportive, and in which you are available to talk about their feelings. Your rewards will be found in their healthy adjustment, positive self-esteem, and close relationship that each of you have with your children. The love, reassurance, and attention to their feelings will help to provide an environment in which they talk about their feelings, something which is very important as your children continue to grow, and which is the theme of this story.

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