

# Divorce

Having parents get divorced or separated is usually a difficult experience for children. They react to divorce in different ways: younger children may become depressed, while older children may become angry. The best ways to help your child adjust after a divorce are to make sure he or she remains involved with both parents and to avoid conflict with your ex-husband or ex-wife.

## How do I deal with divorce?

Going through a divorce or separation is a very hard time for your family. When considering divorce, all parents worry about how it will affect their children. Your child's reactions will depend on many factors, including his or her age and temperament and how well the family was functioning before the split. Another key factor is the parents' ability to focus on their child's reactions during this sad and stressful time.

Divorce can have harmful effects on children. However, there are ways of helping your child adapt to the change. Probably the most important thing is to avoid putting your child in the middle of any family conflicts. You should also allow your child to maintain contact with both parents, if possible. If needed, your doctor's office can put you in touch with mental health professionals and others who can help your family.

## How do children react to divorce?

Every child is different, but children of certain ages tend to react in different ways:

- Very young children (5 or under) may become distressed, sad, or irritable. Behavior problems are common; for example, your child may start "acting like a baby" (sometimes called *regression*).
- In school-aged children, reactions may range from indifference to depression to anger. Most children cling to the hope that the divorce or separation won't really happen. Your child may feel guilty, as if the breakup were his or her fault. Children may try to protect their parents by blaming themselves. Behavior problems or symptoms of illness may be an attempt to keep the parents together.
- Older children and teens are usually angry. They may feel disillusioned and let down by one or both parents. Conflict at home, poor school performance, drug or alcohol

abuse, and other behavior problems are common in these children.

## What is the long-term impact of divorce on children?

Divorce can obviously have negative effects on children. Some remain unhappy and dissatisfied with their family lives in the years after divorce. In adulthood, some children of divorce are reluctant to form intimate relationships because they fear repeating their parents' experience.

However, other children and families adapt well to divorce. Although divorce is sad, some children and families find they do better without the frequent conflicts that led to the split. The parents' reactions—both when the breakup happens and in the months and years afterward—have a major impact on the children's responses.

## How can I help my child adjust after divorce?

- The initial separation is often the hardest time for children as well as for parents. Both you and your child are likely to feel loss, sadness, anger, and distress.
- Try to continue your child's usual routines—including school and friendships—as much as possible. Keep consistent expectations for good behavior, chores and responsibilities, and discipline.
- Allow your child to talk about his or her feelings. Make sure your children know that the divorce is not their fault and that there is nothing they can do to bring their parents back together.
- Parents should take care of themselves as well. Pay attention to your health, and keep in touch with your social support system such as friends and extended family.
- Don't criticize or complain about your spouse in front of your child. Even though you're angry, it is harmful to insult the other parent or to expect your child to take sides.
- The best thing you can do to promote healthy adjustment is to allow your child to maintain contact with the other parent and to avoid conflict with your ex-spouse. Siblings and other family members are also an important source of support.
- Remember that divorce is an ongoing process. As your child grows and develops, the impact of your family situation will change as well.
- Counseling can be very helpful. Our office can put you in touch with mental health professionals for your child or yourself.

 **When should I call your office?**

If your family is experiencing separation, divorce, or other problems, talking to your doctor may be helpful for

recommendations on the care and services that are best for your child and family.