

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS DURING SEPARATION OR DIVORCE PROCEEDINGS

No matter how well parents think their children are adjusting to a divorce, it is traumatic for them. They feel the same strained emotions, uncertainties, and tensions as you do, but have the added factor of being torn between two loving parents. How a child reacts during this stressful time could have a significant impact on the remainder of his life, whether the child is now two years old or eighteen years old.

The following suggestions are made to help you and your children cope with the stress of divorce.

1. Many counties offer mediation or parenting classes to help resolve issues involving the children. Consider using these resources to help resolve as many issues as possible that involve the children.
2. Think first of your children's present and future emotional and mental well-being before acting. *This will be difficult* because of your own feelings, needs, and emotions, but try, try, try.
3. Maintain your own composure and good emotional balance as much as possible. Remember it is not the end of the world. Laugh when you can and try to keep a sense of humor. What your children see in your attitude is to some measure reflected in theirs.
4. Allow yourself and your children time for readjustment. Convalescence from an emotional operation, such as a dissolution of marriage, is essential.
5. Remember the best parts of your marriage. Share them with your children and use them constructively.
6. Assure your children that they are not to blame for the breakup and that they are not being rejected or abandoned. Children, especially the young ones, often mistakenly feel they have done something wrong and believe the problems in the family are the result of their own misdeeds. Small children may feel that some action or secret wish of theirs has caused the trouble between their parents. Explain to them there are other children whose parents have been divorced and that they are not going to lose their mom or dad.
7. Continuing anger or bitterness toward your former partner can injure your children far more than the dissolution itself. The feelings you show are more important than the words you use. Refrain from voicing criticism of the other parent. It is difficult, but absolutely necessary. For the child's healthy development, it is important for him to respect both parents.
8. **Do not force or encourage your children to take sides.** To do so encourages frustration, guilt, and resentment.
9. Try not to upset the children's routine too abruptly. Children need a sense of continuity. It is disturbing to them if they must cope with too many changes all at once.

10. Dissolution of marriage often leads to financial pressures on both parents. When there is a financial crisis, the parents' first impulse may be to keep the children from realizing it. Often, they would rather make sacrifices themselves than ask the child to do so. The atmosphere is healthier when there is frankness and when children are expected to help.
11. Marriage breakdown is always hard on the children. They may not always show their distress or realize at first what this will mean to them. Parents should be direct and simple in telling children what is happening and why, and in a way a child can understand and digest. This will vary with the circumstances and with each child's age and comprehension. The worst course is to try to hush things up and make a child feel he must not talk or even think about what he sees is going on. Unpleasant happenings need explanation, which should be brief, prompt, direct, and honest.
12. The guilt parents may feel about the marriage breakdown may interfere in their disciplining the children. A child needs consistent control and direction. Over-permissive or indecisive parents, who leave a child at the mercy of every passing whim and impulse, interfere with a child's healthy development. Children need and want to know quite clearly what is expected of them. Children need leadership and sometimes authority. Parents must be ready to say "NO" when necessary.
13. Do not overlook the fact that you are only human and admit it. You will not be able to make a 100 percent score on being a perfect parent (no one ever does, even in good times). When you fail in your attempts, acknowledge it, and resolve to attempt to improve day by day.
14. Read and reread these basic guidelines. Add to them by writing down your own constructive, positive approaches to the handling of your new way of living. Discuss your thoughts and feelings with others you trust and feel comfortable with and benefit by sharing their positive attitudes.