

## HELPING YOUR CHILD UNDERSTAND DIVORCE

Divorce is never easy for an adult, much less a child who feels he is losing an essential part of his family. When parents separate, it's common for children to have deep feelings about the changes that are occurring and those that are coming in the future.

The key to helping a child understand divorce is to put yourself in his shoes and show compassion and support when he is expressing his feelings. Once you can understand his perspective, it will enable you, as the parents or the caregiver, to help him cope and adjust to the family changes.

### How A Child Feels

All children, regardless of how well parents have tried to explain the situation to them, tend to feel that they may be responsible for the divorce, says Barbara Lavi, psychologist and author of "The Wake Up and Dream Challenge."

"They also usually wish for their parents to get back together so that their family will be normal again, like other children's families," says Lavi. "This is often true even when the marriage has been stormy and the children have witnessed the conflicts."

The age of your child also plays a factor in how he feels and processes the divorce. "Children around age five or six are most likely to believe they have caused the divorce since they are still struggling with magical thinking," says Lavi. "Teens are more likely to be outwardly angry and act out, although this can happen at any age. Unconsciously, this may be an attempt to bring the parents back together; however, this often backfires and leads to more conflict after an initial attempt to get the teen back on track."

According to Dr. Judy Rosenberg, California-based psychotherapist, a child coping with a parent's divorce often experiences some or all of the following thoughts:

"It's my fault that you are leaving each other. If I wasn't so difficult, you wouldn't be so stressed and you wouldn't have argued as much."

"You are ruining my life. Because of you two, I have to disrupt my entire life to go back and forth between two homes."

"I'm not safe. Because I don't have two people to protect me at all times, I'm more vulnerable."

"I hate the other person you left mommy or daddy for."

These thoughts and feelings will surface sooner or later, Rosenberg warns, so it is important for both parents and nannies to be prepared for these reactions.

### How You Can Help

During this difficult time in your child's life and development, he needs to know that you sincerely care about what he is feeling. Lavi suggests encouraging open discussions about the divorce, the family changes and the plans for the future. "Talk to your children. Find out what they are thinking and

feeling,” she says. “Don’t feed them the words. Ask open-ended questions that leave them room to express whatever they are feeling.”

As your child begins to open up, validate his feelings to avoid conflict or total shut down. “Let them know that whatever they are feeling is okay and that you will try to help them with whatever is bothering them about the divorce,” says Lavi. “Let them know that it is between the parents and that even if both disagree about parenting issues, this is not the reason for the divorce.”

It also helps to explain to a younger child that there are some issues or disagreements he will not understand fully until he is older, but that you are willing to speak with him whenever he has questions or concerns.

The more a trusted caregiver or parent can reassure a hurting child, the more he will be willing to talk openly about the divorce. The child just needs to know that he is loved by both parents, says Lavi. “Make sure they know that you and your spouse love them and will always be their parents, that the two of you will do your best to make sure that all their needs are met,” she says. “Be clear and consistent that you are not going to get back together, if that’s true.”

The key to helping a child cope with his parent’s divorce is to use the strategy of perspective, according to Rosenberg. “If you can, make it easy for them to go back and forth between two parents,” she says. “Spend extra time with your child or children and make sure that you take the pressure off of them when they blame themselves for the divorce.”

As you hopefully develop a stronger bond with your child emotionally, resist the urge to project your feelings of sadness, anger or resentment onto him. “Never lean on your children to be your best friend and ear for your own pain and sympathy,” says Rosenberg. “They have enough to deal with.”