

What Parents Can Do to Help Young Children Adjust to Divorce

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What are some things that parents can do to make the divorce transition easier for young children?

Communicate with your child's other parent

Some parenting issues require communication and coordination between parents. Discuss major changes, such as changing naptime, changing childcare arrangements, or beginning toilet training with the other parent.

Set reasonable limits and enforce them in a consistent, loving way

Sometimes when parents divorce, they become more or less strict than they were before. Parents may become stricter, setting lots of rules and not allowing any flexibility, because they are having a harder time managing their child's behavior. Other parents may become less strict, allowing their child to do things they wouldn't normally allow because they feel bad about the divorce. They want to "make up" for the divorce by allowing their child more freedom or buying their child more things. Parents may also become more permissive following a divorce because they are too preoccupied with their own concerns to closely monitor their children.

Children benefit the most when their parents find a balance between being too strict and being too permissive. Infants are too young for rules. They need to be physically removed from dangerous situations, or distracted when they are doing something they shouldn't do. Toddlers and preschoolers need clear, simple rules that are consistently enforced in a calm and loving way, for example, "Color on the paper, not the wall," or "Hitting hurts people. You may hit the pillow instead." Allowing young children to choose between two appropriate options helps to avoid constant struggles. For example, "Do you want graham crackers or a banana for your snack today?"

Notice Signs of Stress in Your Child

- More crying or tantrums
- Loss of appetite or other digestive disturbances
- Changes in sleep patterns: difficulty getting to sleep or sleeping through the night

- Behavior changes: quieter or withdrawn; fussier; more kicking, hitting, or biting; more difficulty separating; following directions less often
- "Babyish" behavior: thumb sucking or loss of bladder or bowel control. These behaviors usually go away in time.
- Physical symptoms: tummy-aches or headaches

Talk to your pediatrician first if these behaviors appear. If there is not a physical problem, your pediatrician may know where to go for more information. These are also normal behaviors at times for some young children. The important thing to look for is changes in behavior or behavior that is not typical for your child.

Provide Reassurance Surrounding Transitions

All children respond to transitions differently. Some easily adjust to frequent transitions between homes, but others have a harder time. Some young children become very upset by separation from a parent, but others do not. Many young children show signs of stress (see above) when they make frequent transitions between homes. Most young children need a lot of reassurance before and after transitions. Give your child enough time to say good-bye to you and to warm up to the other parent. Send your child's favorite toys or blanket with the child when he or she goes to the other parent's house. Allow young children to have a photograph of the other parent and to make phone calls to the other parent. This reminds them that the other parent is still there and still loves them.

Maintain Consistent Routines

Having consistent routines (having generally the same mealtimes, naptimes, bathtimes, and bedtimes each day) is very important for young children, because it helps them to feel secure. The world can be a confusing place for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Consistent daily routines help them know what is going to happen next. Try to continue old family rituals that your child is used to, for example, going to the park on Saturday afternoon. It is also important to create new rituals, especially if a new adult becomes a regular part of family life. Starting new rituals that include a new partner helps build a strong stepfamily.

