

# A Parenting Guide to Divorce



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## Tips to Reduce the Strain on You and Your Child

With about half of all marriages ending in divorce, many parents will go their separate ways before their children reach age 18. Going through a divorce with children presents unique challenges, and it can take an emotional toll on everyone involved.

However, this toll is often different for parents and children. While it is common for parents to feel stressed and overwhelmed, children often experience feelings of confusion, sadness, uncertainty and even fear about what the future may hold. Even older children are not likely to fully understand what it means for their parents to get divorced; and, regardless of what their parents say, many children will find it difficult not to blame themselves – at least in some respect – for their parents' decision to bring their marriage to an end.

As a parent, talking to your child about your impending divorce can be difficult, but it is important. Letting your children know how your divorce will and won't change their lives, what they can expect during the process, and that your decision has nothing to do with anything they may have said or done can go a very long way toward easing the emotional burden. It is also important to listen, and to be aware of the signs that your child may be reacting adversely, as doing so will allow you to help them manage their feelings along the way.



## Approaching Divorce with Children: A Breakdown Based on Ages

Children of different ages will respond to their parents' divorces differently. This is because children respond to information and stressors differently at different stages of development. Generally speaking, the older a child is, the better able he or she will be to comprehend the practicalities of a divorce (i.e. the parents living in different households and spending time separately with each parent); however, children of all ages will still generally struggle to fully internalize the impacts of their parents' divorce and to express their concerns and feelings effectively.


With this in mind, parents must approach talking with their children with an awareness of the specific considerations that are relevant to their children's current stage of cognitive development. Here is a breakdown of some of the most-important factors and some tips for communicating with children based on their age. Of course, all children will have their own unique response; and, rather than rigidly following any set of general guidelines, parents should tailor their approach based on what they believe will be most effective and most beneficial for their own children:

### How Children Respond to the Effects of Divorce, and What Parents Can Do to Help Their Children

#### 1. Infants (Newborn to Approximately Two Years Old)

Even though newborns may be unable to communicate, they can still sense conflict, and this can affect their mood while also potentially impacting their development. As explained in an article on [Parents.com](https://www.parents.com), “[B]abies are able to feel tension . . . between their parents . . . but can't understand the reasoning behind the conflict. . . . [B]abies may become irritable and clingy, especially around new people, and have frequent emotional outbursts. They may also tend to regress or show signs of developmental delay.”

In order to prevent their divorce from negatively impacting their infant children, the article recommends that parents focus on familiarity and stability. This includes, “maintain[ing] normal daily routines, particularly regarding sleep and meals,” and spending as much time with infants as possible. Additionally, even though infants may not be able to understand what their parents are saying, parents should still avoid getting into heated discussions or having arguments in front of their children.





## 2. Toddlers (Approximately Ages Two to Three)

As children progress into toddlerhood, tension and disruptions are more likely to cause confusion. Children in this age group simply won't understand what is happening—all they will know is that their parents seem upset, and it will be natural for them to assume that they are directly involved. When faced with uncertainty, toddlers will often show signs of regression, and they may develop a tendency to lash out while also seeking more contact and attention.

At this age, parents can – and generally should – talk to their children about their divorce, but they should be sure to do so in terms their children can understand. Speaking over their heads will only add to their confusion and feelings of isolation. Spending as much time together as possible is important at this age as well (and this will be a theme throughout this discussion), as is maintaining a routine that is centered around the children's needs.

## 3. Preschoolers and Kindergartners (Approximately Ages Four to Six)

“Preschoolers need simple, concrete explanations,” explains an article in [Today's Parent](#). With this in mind, when discussing their divorce with their children in this age group, parent should, “[s]tick to the basics: which parent will be moving out, where the child will live, who will look after [the child] and how often [the child will] see the other parent.” Parents should also be prepared for *lots* of questions, and they should be prepared to provide real answers that directly address their children's concerns.

Additionally, as noted by Parents.com, “Like toddlers, preschoolers believe they are ultimately responsible for their parents' separation.” No matter how much their parents explain, preschoolers and kindergartners are going to struggle to understand how and why their lives are going to change in a way that they never previously thought possible. Anger, uncertainty as to how to react, anxiety, and sadness are all common feelings, and helping children express these feelings can be an important step toward helping them cope generally with their parents' divorce.

#### 4. Young School Age (Approximately Ages Seven to Eleven)

Children between the ages of approximately seven and eleven will generally have a better understanding of their own feelings, and this means that they are likely to be hit harder by their parents' divorce. Many children will feel as though they are being abandoned, or that they will be abandoned once their parents go their separate ways. For this reason, it is also common for children in this age group to feel a desire to try to prevent the divorce and preserve their family unit.

It is also in this age range, usually on the higher end, that some children will begin to take sides. They may have a stronger emotional connection to one parent, and this may lead them to blame the other. As a result, not only is it important that parents communicate with their children about their divorce and the divorce process, but it is also important for both parents to avoid blaming one another or helping to foster feelings of ill-will. No matter how the parents feel about one another, they should not under any circumstances try to get their children "on their side," as this has been shown to have not only severe detrimental impacts on children's emotional stability, but to have a negative impact on the children's ability to adjust to post-divorce life as well.

#### 5. Pre-Teen and Teen (Ages 12 and Older)

The pre-teen and teen years can be among the most-confusing of any child's life—and this is true *before* they learn that their parents have decided to get divorced. Children ages 12 and older are even more likely than their younger siblings to cast blame, whether on themselves or on one or both of their parents. At this age, a divorce may also lead children to question their parents' authority, and that of their non-custodial parent post-divorce in particular, and they are also much more likely to pick a side during the divorce process. However, this will not invariably be the case, and some pre-teens and teens will react to their parents' divorce by becoming withdrawn or acting out, and it also is not uncommon to see signs of anxiety and depression.

According to Today's Parent, for children in this age group, "[k]eeping communication open decreases the chance that emotional problems [will] slip under the radar. Kids in this age group can be harder to reach, . . . [b]ut most teens and preteens still need and crave connection with [their] parents." Even if a child acts disinterested or rebukes his or her parents' efforts to discuss their divorce, it is still very important for parents to make the effort to explain their family's situation and share as much pertinent information as they can so that their children know they are not being ignored.



## Warning Signs that Tension at Home Due to an Impending Divorce May Be Getting to Your Children

Given the wide range of emotions that children in different age groups can experience upon learning of their parents' decision to get divorced, it is important for parents to be aware of the warning signs that their children may be harboring feelings internally—whether intentionally or not. If parents have concerns, they should speak with their children to provide information and guidance, and they should consult with appropriate professionals as and when necessary.

Some of the more common signs that children may be struggling emotionally as a result of their parents' impending divorce include:

**Infants (Newborn to Approximately Two Years Old)** – Among infants, signs that they may be internalizing tension in the home include increased irritability, emotional outbursts, developmental regression or delays, and being more clingy than usual.

**Toddlers (Approximately Ages Two to Three)** – For toddlers who can begin to understand that one of their parents is leaving but who still lack the ability to comprehend other aspects of their parents' divorce, warning signs may include crying or seeking attention more frequently than usual, developmental regression or delays, and waking up more frequently in the night.

**Preschoolers and Kindergartners (Approximately Ages Four to Six)** – Children in this age group will often respond to news of their parents' divorce by regressing in their emotional independence, by having outbursts, and by exhibiting signs of worry or frustration due to their inability to change the situation at hand.

**Young School Age (Approximately Ages Seven to Eleven)** – Again, for children in this age group, one of the biggest concerns is often their fear of abandonment. Parents should monitor for signs of fear and anxiety, as well as signs of depression and withdrawal. Some children in this age group will experience physical symptoms of stress as well.

**Pre-Teen and Teen (Ages 12 and Older)** – For pre-teens and teens, the warning signs that they may be responding negatively to their parents' divorce can include any of the above. Pre-teens and teens may also attempt to “test” their parents to either confirm or disaffirm their concerns about being abandoned post-divorce.

### Additional Resources for Divorced Parents

- Psychological Effects of Divorce on Children: <https://www.verywellfamily.com/psychological-effects-of-divorce-on-kids-4140170>
- Co-Parenting Tips for Divorced and Separated Families: <https://www.survivedivorce.com/co-parenting-tips>
- Making Stepfamilies Work: <https://www.apa.org/topics/stepfamily>