



CARE INSTRUCTIONS

KAISER PERMANENTE

Learning About How to Help a Child Cope With Divorce

How does divorce affect children?

Divorce can cause serious and lasting effects on a child. A child's reaction and ability to cope will depend on his or her age and personality and the circumstances around the divorce.

Kids often feel sad, angry, guilty, and fearful when parents break up. Behavior problems are common as children grieve the loss of the family. Kids may worry that their parents do not love them.

How parents treat each other as they divorce and how well they provide security and comfort for the child also will have an impact.

How do children show stress?

- **Children younger than age 3** may be irritable, cry more, and have sleep and stomach problems. They may start acting younger than their age and fear being separated from the parent who has custody. These children may have problems with bladder control or may wet the bed.
- **Children ages 4 to 5** may blame themselves for the breakup. They may be confused, have trouble expressing themselves with words, and become clingy. They may worry about being abandoned or fantasize that their parents will get back together. They often act out.
- **School-age children** often grieve openly and struggle to accept the divorce as permanent. They may feel rejected by the parent who is not in the home. They may do poorly in school, blame themselves for the split, and feel as if they should be punished.
- **Adolescents and teens** are more likely to take sides with one parent over the other. Their self-esteem may suffer. They may struggle with relationships and substance abuse and

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may experiment with sex. They may do poorly in school, feel anger or shame, or become depressed. Adolescents have more trouble adapting to stepparents, but they may be more open to counseling and support from teachers, grandparents, or other mentors.

How can you help your child cope with divorce?

- Tell your child early on what is happening. Reinforce that the divorce is not your child's fault.
- Be warm and reassuring, and listen to your child. Ask about his or her worries or fears.
- Provide structure and discipline. Keeping a routine is important and helps your child feel secure.
- Maintain positive, stable events like soccer games, piano lessons, and overnight visits with friends. This will help your child feel as if his or her world is still safe.
- Do not try to get your child to take sides.
- Avoid criticizing the other parent. Do not argue in front of the child or where he or she can overhear you, especially when talking about the details of visits, holidays, or custody.
- Respect the other parent's values, and try to keep rules for the child the same between households.
- Do not make your child feel bad for leaving you or say things that might make the child feel that he or she must fix the other parent.

Where can you learn more?

Go to <http://www.kp.org>

Enter Z640 in the search box to learn more about "**Learning About How to Help a Child Cope With Divorce**".

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