

Kids and Divorce

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Divorce is tough on everyone involved--Mom, Dad, as well as the kids. We all know that—it's a no-brainer. But, there are some steps that parents can take to make the situation less confusing for their children as well as for the family as a whole. Although lives are forever changed by divorce, it doesn't have to be chaotic or devastating if you try to think clearly, attempt to put the children's needs at the forefront, and continue to clarify what is happening in your life as well as the kids'.

In talking with many of my divorced clients about their problems and concerns with their children, I often recommend a checklist provided by Isolina Ricci, In "Mom's House, Dad's House" (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982) aimed at calming their kids' fears. If you're in the same boat, check out these fifteen suggestions—following them may make the difference between your children becoming miserable, afraid, and out of control or understanding, accepting and realistic about their homelives and futures:

1. Reassure your children that you love them and will always take care of them and look after their needs, no matter what happens between you and their other parent. You will always be their parent and do what you feel is best for them.
2. Explain that the separation and, later, the divorce are grown-up business between Mom and Dad. Do not ever imply or state that your children had any responsibility for your fights or for the ending of your marriage, even if in your off-the-wall moments you may feel they did.
3. Tell your children they will now have two homes instead of one and begin to use words like "live with Mom or Dad" instead of "visit." Tell them how your two homes will work and back it up with action.
4. Reassure your children that although there will be changes in your family life and that it will take time for all of you to get used to these new ways, after a time, things should turn out well. Explain to them that you may all have times when you feel confused, perhaps sad or angry, but that all of you will have happy times too.
5. Show by your actions that you and the other parent can cope, that you are the grown-ups and are in control of what is happening to your family. Regular routine and house and safety rules are important ways to restore order.
6. Listen to your children's opinions and whenever possible give them options. When children are consulted on family matters they seem happier, and act more confident. You are responsible for the final decisions, but your children should be heard.
7. Be honest with your children; demystify the process with concrete information about the change that is simple, brief, and appropriate to their age.
8. Never threaten your children with abandonment, even in hopes that it will make them obey you. It is dirty fighting on your part, unnecessarily frightening and can lead them to respect you and your tactic.
9. Don't lead children to believe that you and the other parent will reconcile unless this is a strong possibility. Fostering false dreams of reuniting their parents in that original close family feeling is not a help to their readjustment to this new life.
10. Find comfortable ways to show affection for your children. Hold them on you lap, or hold their hands, touch them, give them spontaneous happy hugs, have loving eye

contact. Words are not enough; follow or accompany them with affection. This human warmth and comfort is a vital physical communication that brings its own special kind of reassurance for both of you.

11. Reconfirm your assurances frequently during the first year and even into the second year after separation. Such reassurances are part of their feelings of security—especially actions and affection that say you are glad to be their parent, that you love them, and that they will be taken care of.
12. Check yourself occasionally to see how heavily you may be leaning on your children for their support. While you have a right to your children's respect and love, they are not adults and do not have the same emotional resources or experiences that you do. Repeatedly ask yourself, "Who is reassuring whom?"
13. Don't outlaw crying or honest display of emotions for your children or yourself. Crying is natural and offers release when it is spontaneous and follows appropriately on hurts, frights, or spats.
14. Enjoy your children, have some family fun times. In the midst of all the do's and don'ts and new pressures, take time just to relax together or play together. Laughter is a great healer and it nearly always gives a new perspective. The years together will go by quickly enough and these fun times will be part of your treasure.
15. Trust yourself and your instincts. Trust in your children, have confidence in their ability to change and learn. You are the best judge of what is best for you and for your children. If you have restored order in your household, have done your two-home groundwork, and established safety rules and house rules, you have already gone a long way in demonstrating your love for your children and in caring for their needs.

Dealing with the other parent following divorce is always a challenge—not only for you but for the kids as well. Some advice that I give my own clients is to try to keep the children out of the middle. This may entail your checking with your ex-spouse directly for information that the kids could provide, but it keeps the grown-up matters to the adults, away from the kids. Try not to gather information about your ex's life or circumstances from your children—that's snooping and it really puts the kids in a bad position. If your children are reticent about visiting your ex, have them discuss it directly with that person—try to stay out of the middle or you may unwittingly become manipulated into a battle that is not yours. And finally, NEVER badmouth your kids' other parent—it not only makes you look disrespectful, but remember--your children are "half" you and "half" the other parent—when you put the other guy down you're also lambasting the kids. If you must discuss negatives with the children (due to safety issues, for instance), do so in a brief yet factual manner.

Another problem that often rears its head is that of the child who doesn't have the interest or the inclination to visit the non-custodial parent. As I noted above, this should be dealt with between the child and that parent if at all possible. Your ex has the responsibility and the authority to deal with visitation issues on those days and it may will you some grief if you let the child and that parent work it out. If they can't, it's appropriate for the two of them to discuss the issue with a trusted family friend, pastor, or a counselor.

Following these guidelines is not a guarantee that life with the kids after divorce will be a cake walk—it's definitely more difficult when one parent takes the responsibility of getting the kids off to school in one piece, not to mention to ballet and baseball on time! However, divorced parents often do a bang-up job of parenting, especially if they have set up fair rules, are consistent, and trust their parenting instincts!