



Helping Children Adjust When Parents Separate

Here's the most important thing to know:

A child's ability to manage how they're feeling is directly affected by how the parents manage their feelings toward each other and the situation.

When there's a great deal of arguing, tension, or anger expressed between you or about your ex, a child has more difficulty. When parents truly set aside their own conflicts while with the children, a child has less difficulty. So parents have a lot of power in this situation to really make things better for their children. If one or both of the parents are not handling conflict well, one of you needs to take the lead in making it happen for the sake of the children.

We often recommend that separated or divorced parents read "The Good Divorce" by Constance Ahrons. Her overall point is that collaboration by both parents for the good of the children, even when they're no longer able to stay together, must be the primary goal. Check out our website, www.leesplace.org, for more book suggestions on divorce for children and adults.

Children in divorced or divorcing homes tend toward more emotional neediness, some increase in acting out behaviors, more discord between siblings at times, and even overly responsible and caretaking types of behaviors. (This last example often occurs when children are worrying about their parents.) They have a need for more reassurance and to see that both parents are "ok". Make sure you regularly spend some time with each child separately, as well as sharing time all together at meals, for example, to provide reassurance and support. Having consistent schedules and rules, preferably at both households, is also important.

Signs that a child might need the additional support of counseling include some combination of the following: difficulty with or changes in sleeping habits; marked changes in appetite; increased and/or unpredictable moodiness; isolative behaviors; increased irritability or more easily angered; and any frequent demonstration of intense emotionality – crying, yelling, or tantrums. Also, it's normal for kids to be out of sorts for a day or two when arriving or returning from visits, however, adamantly not wanting to visit or leave a parent can indicate your child's distress needs professional attention.

We'd like to say that a child's need for counseling is not necessarily an indication of poor parenting. However, as stated above, parents have a large role to play in helping them feel better about the divorce.

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