



YOUR KIDS
.....
&
.....
YOUR DIVORCE

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
How Does Divorce Affect Children?	4
Money	4
Emotions	5
A Word on Fighting	6
The Ways Divorce Affects Children	6
Signs That Your Children Might Be Feeling Stressed.	7
So What Can You Do?	9
Signs of More Serious Distress	11
A Child's List of Wants	12
Signs That Your Children Are Coping Well	13
The Bottom Line About Your Children and Your Divorce	14
Carve Out Time for Your Children	14

INTRODUCTION

Divorce isn't easy on anyone involved. You are busy parenting, working, and keeping up with all of your other obligations – and you still have to manage your emotions, make the right choices and work your way through the divorce process.

If you're like most parents, your primary concern is your children.

How will they handle the divorce?

Will they adjust to their new lifestyles and living arrangements?

Are they going to be okay?

We've consulted with top psychologists to understand what happens with children during divorce, and we've put together some advice you can use to help them deal with what's happening.

You're a dedicated, committed parent. The fact that you're concerned about your children's well-being says so.

And that means you're *all* going to make it through this divorce; you'll come out of it stronger and more resilient than you ever thought you could.

We're here to help you every step of the way, so any time you need case-specific advice, feel free to call us at 425-460-0550 or [get in touch with us online](#).

Molly B. Kenny

Tatyana A. Gidirimski

Law Offices of Molly B. Kenny

9 Lake Bellevue Drive, #204

Bellevue, WA 98005

425-460-0550

HOW DOES DIVORCE AFFECT CHILDREN?

No two children experience divorce the same way. However, there's no denying that divorce does affect them – and there are some common themes that many children deal with when their parents split.

It's very important that you know the “research” that says that divorce inevitably and permanently harms children has been thoroughly debunked. Naturally, children who are old enough to understand what's happening will be affected differently than children who aren't, but the fact remains that children who have loving parents are typically resilient enough to come through it mentally healthy and without permanent effect.

MONEY

Many children notice the financial strain of living in a single-parent household. Even if the marital home included one earner and one stay-at-home parent, the economic challenges usually create a significant change for children whose parents have divorced.

However, the upside is that children – particularly older ones – typically understand the sacrifices both of their parents make in order to ensure that they have enough.

Family advocate Michelle Cooper Staley says that children may notice that one parent lives in a nicer home, but “the child only cares about spending good quality time with the parents.”

We hear this from our clients, too; children determine their standard of living based on how much love they receive.

Sure, they'll notice when you have to tighten the purse strings. But that's not how most children gauge whether they're well cared-for.

Karen Bonnell, ARNP, MS, a Co-Parent Coach and the author of *The Co-Parent Handbook*, recommends that parents talk frankly with children about

what is affordable in your household with confidence and help them with resetting expectations.

According to Bonnell, if you are on good terms with your ex, you may consider discussing whether the child gets an allowance in one or both households. Consider also whether to offer extra chores for the children as a way to earn money. This will give them confidence and help develop appropriate expectations about work and money.

EMOTIONS

“Divorce is almost always stressful for children. Most children do not want their parents to separate (unless the marriage was full of intense conflict and anger or other sources of misery not suitable for children). Divorce also can strain parent-child relationships, lead to lost contact with one parent, create economic hardships, and increase conflict between parents,” says Robert E. Emery, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Director of the Center for Children, Families, and the Law at the University of Virginia.

According to Carl E. Pickhardt, Ph.D., an Austin, Texas psychologist who’s authored 15 parenting books, children’s short-term reaction to divorce is usually some form of anxiety. Children whose parents are divorcing wonder what is going to happen next and whether their parents, who no longer love each other, will stop loving them as well.

The way you handle your children’s anxiety from divorce directly affects their psychological outlook. Divorce only increases the risk that children will suffer from behavioral and psychological problems, and caring, knowledgeable parents can mitigate that risk.

“The great majority of children whose parents divorce do not develop these kinds of serious behavioral or emotional problems. Most children from divorced families are resilient, especially when their parents do a reasonably good job managing the stress of divorce. These children – most children from divorced families – feel and function pretty much like children whose parents are married. They are not ‘children of divorce.’ They are what we want all children to be: just children,” says Emery.

A WORD ON FIGHTING

Psychologists know that fighting around children can cause irreparable harm. According to Susan Pease Gadoua, L.C.S.W., author and licensed therapist who focuses on marriage and divorce, it's important that you ask yourself what message you are sending your children if you stay in an unhealthy relationship.

If you're teaching them that fighting – not just the occasional disagreement or even more frequent arguments – is okay within a relationship, they'll be better off if you and your spouse distance yourselves from each other. Long gone are the days when couples stayed together “for the children,” and for good reason; we now know that living in a contentious environment is in many ways more harmful than dealing with a divorce.

THE WAYS DIVORCE AFFECTS CHILDREN

Children's emotional reaction to parents' separation, financial struggles, and parents' ability to co-parent are the three biggest factors that affect children during divorce – so what can you do to ensure that yours are coping with it well, and what can you do if they're not?

SIGNS THAT YOUR CHILDREN MIGHT BE FEELING STRESSED.

As parents, nobody knows our children as well as we do. We know their moods, and we can tell when something's not right.

During divorce, it's normal for children to display signs of stress and a whole range of other emotions; it's a time of upheaval, so it's natural for them to experience a number of feelings.

Most children will show at least some or all of the symptoms listed below during the divorce or after. But exhibiting these symptoms is a normal part of the process and does not mean that they will not adjust.

YOUR CHILD MAY DO SOME OR ALL OF THE FOLLOWING:

- Becomes abnormally "clingy"
- Display poor academic performance
- Engage in risky or dangerous activities
- Get into trouble at school
- Give up extracurricular activities in favor of being alone
- Have an oppositional, defiant attitude
- Have trouble sleeping
- Is quick to become teary or emotional
- Stop spending time with friends
- Use aggressive speech or mannerisms

The caveat to all this is that you have to gauge your child's current behavior and tendencies against the way he or she acted prior to the divorce. It's not uncommon for teens to occasionally have oppositional, defiant attitudes (*thanks, hormones!*) or to become teary and emotional, but if you notice that these symptoms are more severe since the divorce or separation, it may be time to readjust your strategies.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

It is difficult to worry about whether your children are coping well, but it's even more difficult to watch them suffer through it unnecessarily.

Please know that it's completely normal (and, in many cases, immensely helpful) to take your children to a counselor or therapist who specializes in working with children whose parents are divorcing. If you need a referral to a local professional, please let us know; we'll be happy to point you in the right direction. Feel free to call us at 425-460-0550 or get in touch with us online for a referral.

THAT SAID, THERE ARE NUMEROUS OTHER WAYS YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE:

- If possible, coordinate with the other parent so that the child receives consistent messages in both households.
- Assure the child that both parents still love him or her very much, but they have just fallen out of love with each other and will no longer live together. So now the child will have two homes instead of one.
- Do not let the child think that he or she can make decisions with regard to his or her own custody arrangement or visitation. While older adolescents' opinions should be taken into account, no child, no matter how emotionally mature, should be led to think that they are in charge of these issues. These issues are for grown-ups.
- Take care of yourself! Karen Bonnell, ARNP, MS, a Co-Parent Coach and the author of *The Co-Parent Handbook*, recommends that parents take steps to heal and avoid or manage triggers, rage, and meltdowns inherent in a divorce. "Employing constructive strategies to protect your healing heart, soothe your raging thoughts, and relax your exhausted body" will help you. And this translates to less anxiety for your children. Managing your own emotions will free the children from feeling like they have to step in and protect you.

- Bonnell also recommends that you really listen to your children and then let them know you understand their feelings. Respond to tough questions with care and follow with comfort.
- Really listen. As adults, we all need an ear, and children are no different. It's a good idea to encourage them to talk (without forcing them, of course); you may be surprised that they're feeling things you may not have expected. Let them know that whatever they say is okay so they feel comfortable sharing – that's the first step in working through feelings.
- Acknowledge and validate their feelings. While you might not be able to fix their problems, acknowledging them rather than dismissing them helps build trust.
- Tell them that things will be okay. Explaining that things may not be easy but that they'll work out will give your children the optimism they need to be even more resilient.
- Avoid blaming or being critical of your ex. It can be difficult to tread softly in this area, but blaming or being critical of your ex can hurt your children – and it certainly does not help your relationship with them, either.
- Educate yourself on the impact divorce has on you and them by reading books, talking to other divorced parents and/or seeing a counselor yourself.

SIGNS OF MORE SERIOUS DISTRESS

According to Bonnell, if things with your children get worse rather than better despite consistency and life settling down, consult with your child's healthcare provider and/or a mental health professional. If your child experiences any of the following symptoms, he or she may need additional ongoing support:

- Significant and persistent sleep problems
- Persistent and frequent body-related complaints (such as headaches, tummy aches, etc.)
- Significant behavioral or academic issues at school
- Frequent angry or violent outbursts
- Prolonged withdrawal from loved ones and/or peer relationships
- Refusal to care for him or herself or lack of belief in his or her ability to accomplish things
- Prolonged loss of enjoyment of previously enjoyed activities
- Drug or alcohol use, reckless behavior, sexual acting out
- Discussion of suicidal fears, thoughts, or plans

If you notice these signs and symptoms, call your child's doctor or therapist.

A CHILD'S LIST OF WANTS

Researchers and psychologists at the University of Missouri compiled a list of what children really want from their parents during divorce. This is what they came up with:

- I need both of you to stay involved in my life. Please write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions. When you don't stay involved, I feel like I'm not important and that you don't really love me.
- Please stop fighting and work hard to get along with each other. Try to agree on matters related to me. When you fight about me, I think that I did something wrong and I feel guilty.
- I want to love you both and enjoy the time that I spend with each of you. Please support me and the time that I spend with each of you. If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides and love one parent more than the other.
- Please communicate directly with my other parent so that I don't have to send messages back and forth.
- When talking about my other parent, please say only nice things, or don't say anything at all. When you say mean, unkind things about my other parent, I feel like you are expecting me to take your side.
- Please remember that I want both of you to be a part of my life and count on both of you to raise me, to teach me what is important, and to help me when I have problems.

SIGNS THAT YOUR CHILDREN ARE COPING WELL

The truth is that although divorce is tough, most children are remarkably resilient. You'll be able to tell that they're coping well by maintaining regular dialogue with them.

According to divorce and parenting coach Rosalind Sedacca, there are 10 signs that your child is handling divorce in the right way:

- They look, behave and talk as they always have.
- They still smile and react positively when they spend time with you.
- They aren't afraid to ask you questions about the divorce and the changes looming on the horizon.
- They're comfortable talking to you about your ex, and vice-versa.
- Their grades and behavior at school are the same.
- They maintain healthy relationships with friends.
- They still have interest in sports, school or extracurricular activities.
- They're able to show empathy and have compassion for others.
- They're optimistic enough to talk about the future – including birthdays, holidays and other events.
- They welcome affection from you and your ex.

You may not see this right away but most likely your child will start to show these signs as the divorce winds down or is final.

THE BOTTOM LINE ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN AND YOUR DIVORCE

There's no denying that divorce does affect the children, and there are some common themes that many children deal with when their parents split.

However, children who have loving parents are typically resilient enough to come through it mentally healthy and without permanent effect. Research has repeatedly shown that much of the way a divorce affects children really boils down to how their parents are handling it.

If you have a healthy attitude about life, your children are more likely to respond in a more positive way.

It is important that you and your ex keep the lines of communication open between you – and if you see any warning signs that something's not right, don't be afraid to step in and fix it. You know your children better than anyone else does, so you'll be able to pick up on even subtle cues.

CARVE OUT TIME FOR YOUR CHILDREN

The more time you are able to spend with your children, the better. Even if you have a custody arrangement that does not give you as much time as you would like, it is a good idea to make the most of the time you do have. You can do that by powering down your phone, setting work aside until after the children are in bed, and shutting out other distractions so you can devote time exclusively to your children.