

Kids Need Help Long After Divorce

by Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran

Separation and divorce are chaotic times for families and especially for children.

Children whose parents are going through a divorce often feel angry, hurt, confused, and insecure. Often parents are experiencing so much emotional pain and confusion themselves, it is hard to focus on the children's experience.

It may be helpful to understand that it is not the divorce which hurts the children as much as the parents' attitudes and behaviors. Research in the field of separation and divorce consistently shows us that children's post-divorce adjustment is dependent on: the quality of their relationship with each parent before the divorce, the intensity and duration of parental conflict during the marriage, divorce, and thereafter, and the parents' ability to focus on the needs of the children.

Here are final suggestions for parents as to what they can do to help their children adjust to the reconfiguration of their family.

- Post a time-sharing schedule where the children can see it. Even children as young as 12 months can follow along with a color-coded time-sharing schedule where days with one parent are red, days with the other parent are blue, for example. They can even help "check off" the days as they go by and thereby know where they are in time and when they will see the other parent again.
- Before becoming distressed at your child's seeming reluctance to transition to the other parent, take note as to whether he is seeking to avoid being with the other parent, wanting to have some control, demonstrating loyalty to you, or, as may often be the case, having fun and just not ready to stop what he is doing and leave.
- Divorced parents can stay emotionally hooked to one another and easily fall into fighting. Because kids tend to want parents to be together, they may see their parents' fighting as a way for their parents to stay together. They may even do things to promote the fighting. This is especially true in families where there was fighting followed by "kiss and make-up" in the marriage.
- Divorced spouses do not permit themselves to get through the divorce transition when they are focused on the other parent and refuse to let go. Focus on your future.
- Considering that children have fantasies of their parents' reconciliation for many years after the divorce, introduce the children to new partners very slowly. It is not usually necessary for the children to meet a casual date or develop a relationship with a series of new partners. Children may experience separation loss and be confused about what "family" and "marriage" mean. Consider only introducing your children to a new partner after some form of commitment has been made between you and that new partner. Going slowly will also help the chances of the children building a positive relationship with that person. Children often have difficulty if they perceive themselves to be in competition with that new partner for your attention.
- During the introductory phases of helping the children adjust to your new relationship, have some one-on-one time with each of your children in addition to time you spend as a new family. Talk with your children about any concerns they may have. A key part of the children's acceptance of your new partner will be the reaction of the other parent. Find a time to discuss these issues with the other parent to avoid problems.

- Create developmentally appropriate time-sharing plans. Consider that children's desires and needs change over time. What a 6-month-old and a 10-year-old can do and what they need are very different. In general, the following are important considerations in developing an age-appropriate time-sharing plan:

For children under 3

Children under 3 express their needs and someone comes to take care of their needs. That person is a "primary caregiver" in the child's life. The child knows she can depend on that person to meet her needs. The child is learning whether other people are trustworthy.

When children are separated for long periods of time from someone they know to be dependable, and placed with someone whom they do not yet know to be as dependable, they experience anxiety and insecurity. They learn not to trust their needs will be met.

This concept is called attachment. It refers to the bond a child develops with his primary caregiver or caregivers. Yes, a child can have more than one primary caregiver. It can be anyone who the child has learned will consistently and dependably respond to a cry for help. For their emotional development, it is critical that children form secure attachments with their primary caregivers.

The attachment bonds formed in childhood have been shown to have a very strong impact on how we relate to others as adults, especially in intimate relationships.

Children under three are developing their attachment bonds and need frequent contact with both parents and no prolonged separation from their primary caregiver(s).

A parent can become a primary caregiver to a child with frequent contact, changing diapers, feeding, comforting, bathing, etc. It's not enough to just have time with the child; it must be nurturing, caretaking time.

For children ages 3 to 5

Once children are past their "attachment phase," more flexibility and longer blocks of time with each parent are possible.

Children under 5 still need frequent contact with both parents because of their undeveloped sense of time.

A posted, color-coded time-sharing calendar in both parents' households can be helpful to a child in this age group.

For children ages 6 to 12

Children at this age are usually the most flexible.

If the schedule is workable for the parents, it will most likely be workable for the child. Children in this age group are somewhat like barometers of their parents' adjustment.

Regardless of a child's age, a child should have a sense of being listened to in expressing his preferences for having time with both parents.

For children 13 and older

Children in this age group usually prefer fewer transitions and longer blocks of time with parents. Or they may prefer to have one primary home and “make dates” to have time with the other parent. Don’t let this hurt your feelings. As children grow older, their relationships with their friends are more important to them than their parents.

Adolescents are creating an identity that is separate from their parents. They need to “roost” (which means “hang out in their space”). They also need to be easily available to their friends by phone.

Divorcing parents have many financial and legal decisions they need to make about the future. Be sure you and the other parent also make a conscious decision about what kind of divorce experience you want for your children. Seek help when you need it. Community resources for divorcing parents include counseling, mediation, legal assistance, classes at Lane Community College, and support groups.

Kathleen O’Connell Corcoran, M.S., N.C.C., was a mediator, family counselor, and nationally recognized trainer in the field of separation and divorce. Her family and friends welcome visitors to the garden they created in her memory at Lamb Cottage in Skinner Butte Park.

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