

Divorce: Helping Handout for Home

KAREY L. O'HARA, SHARLENE A. WOLCHIK, & IRWIN SANDLER

INTRODUCTION

Parental divorce is a common life stressor that affects approximately 30–50% of children in the United States before they reach age 16 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008). This transition is stressful for almost all families, and nearly all children are upset, sad, and angry after their parents separate. However, children respond differently to divorce, even within the same family, and the majority of children *do not* respond with significant behavior problems that persist throughout their lives.

Although most youth adapt well following divorce, some do not, and so divorce is associated with higher rates of maladjustment in multiple domains of a child's life. For some, such problems persist into adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). For example, children who experience parental divorce have higher rates of anxiety, depression, aggression, drug and alcohol use, and obesity than those who live in two-parent households (Amato, 2001; Yannakoulia et al., 2008). They also have lower academic achievement and drop out of school at higher rates (Amato, 2001; Kelly, 2012). Adults who experienced parental divorce in childhood are more likely to have symptoms of anxiety and depression, have lower educational attainment, report being less satisfied or happy in life, and have lower incomes (Sun & Li, 2008). Fortunately, there are many ways in which parents can help their children adjust to the changes that occur during and after the divorce so that these problems are avoided.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Over the past several decades, research has demonstrated the value of several strategies to

reduce the likelihood of children experiencing serious behavior problems following divorce. These strategies are appropriate for parents who were legally married as well as those who were cohabitating prior to the separation. We use the term *divorce* to include both groups.

Youth at all stages of development need their parents to focus on supporting them in achieving milestones and limiting stress that may overwhelm their capacity to function, learn, and grow. How parents achieve these goals varies based on the child's age and abilities, and it is important for parents to tailor the strategies to their children's developmental needs and individual characteristics. For example, young children who do not have extensive language skills may respond to stressors through their behavior. They may be more clingy than usual or backslide in their willingness to do tasks for themselves (e.g., they may whine and point instead of ask for what they need). Children in elementary school may have a hard time sleeping or resume temper tantrums, while older youth in middle and high school may be more withdrawn or irritable. All youth need to know what to expect as they go about their daily lives, and they will benefit from some understanding of the reasons underlying major life changes. The amount of information shared and level of detail, however, must be based on their age and stage of development, to avoid overwhelming them.

Youth vary greatly with regard to how they respond and cope with this family transition. Some will adjust well and others will struggle (Kelly, 2012). If a child is engaging in behaviors or emotions that are interfering with the basic tasks of life (e.g., sleeping well, getting along with others) or academic progress, it is a good idea to seek professional help from a licensed mental health professional who specializes

in helping children adjust to major life changes. The school psychologist or school counselor can help connect parents with community resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Divorcing parents can decrease problem behaviors and increase healthy functioning in their children by using research-based strategies across four major areas: (a) protecting children from conflict and using positive coparenting; (b) supporting the children; (c) maintaining structure, predictability, and rules; and (d) caring for themselves. The recommendations below are drawn primarily from books written by Pedro-Carroll (2010) and Long and Forehand (2002), as well as the New Beginnings Program (Wolchik, Schenck, & Sandler, 2009).

Protecting Children From Conflict and Using Positive Coparenting

Ongoing conflict between parents is the strongest predictor of children's behavior problems following divorce (Amato, 2001). The most powerful ways to promote your child's development and reduce behavior problems are to keep your child from witnessing or becoming involved in postdivorce conflict of any kind and to practice positive coparenting strategies. It is important to remember that conflict takes on many forms, including having verbal arguments, physically fighting, bad-mouthing, and putting children in the middle.

In addition to keeping children out of ongoing conflicts between you and your ex-spouse, you will make your children's lives much easier if you develop a positive coparenting relationship. Positive coparenting keeps both parents involved and supportive of each other's relationship with the children, helps keep communication open between the parents, and provides for smooth, nonconflictual transitions between households. Establishing a positive coparenting relationship may take extra work and may not be easy, but it will be worth it as you place a priority on your children's well-being. Positive coparenting is like a functional business relationship. You may not get along socially, but you work together on your shared common interest: the well-being of your children.

1. **Prepare for interactions with the other parent.**

Many divorcing parents see each other infrequently outside of activities that involve

their children (e.g., pickups, school events), so it can be tempting to discuss potentially explosive topics in these situations. To refrain from having these discussions, put yourself in your children's shoes and imagine what it feels like when the two people who are most important to you are fighting or arguing. Before going to such activities, tell yourself that you will not discuss conflictual issues with the other parent. If the other parent starts such a discussion, say that you will not talk about difficult issues when the children are around, stop the conversation, and arrange to talk about them another time. Remember that children should not pay the price of the conflicts you have with their other parent.

2. **Communicate with the other parent in ways that do not involve your children.** You can use phone calls, texts, or e-mails to directly communicate with your children's other parent, rather than send messages through your children. Too often, what seem like simple messages or requests can turn into arguments, and it is important to protect your children from involvement in these arguments. There are also smartphone apps designed to help parents communicate.
3. **Watch out for subtle forms of exposure to conflict.** Avoid questions that convey disapproval about the other parent's choices (e.g., "So, he went out with his friends when you were there?"). These situations can make children feel caught in the middle, and that they need to side with one parent or the other.
4. **Do not ask your children to be go-betweens.** If you have questions or need to share information, communicate directly with the other parent. Do not ask or hint for your child to tell you about the other parent's social or work life.
5. **Resist the urge to tell the whole truth about the reasons for the divorce, especially if it casts the other parent in a negative light.** Give clear, accurate, and age-appropriate facts about the reasons for the separation. For example, you might tell your school-age child, "We are not going to live together anymore because of adult problems between us that have nothing to do with you." If your child indicates that the other parent has said things about the divorce that you disagree with, do not feel that you need to tell your side of the story. Instead, reiterate that there were adult problems that led to the divorce, and that you are now focused on how to make things work best in the

new family structure. As one child eloquently said, "Tell us about the changes in our family, and what will happen to us, but please spare us the gory details" (Pedro-Carroll, 2010, p. 86).

6. **Tell your children that the divorce was not their fault.** Help them see the problems between you and the other parent as yours, not theirs, and emphasize that they are *not* responsible for fixing them. Without direct, clear information, children may assume the worst.
7. **Do not use your children as confidants.** Hearing about your problems, particularly those that involve the other parent, can make children anxious and pressured to take sides. Find a trusted adult to talk with about your struggles.
8. **Respectfully ask friends and family members to avoid speaking negatively about your children's other parent.** Be certain that your children do not accidentally overhear these kinds of comments. Children often pick up on these types of conversations, even when adults think that they are not listening or paying attention.

Supporting Your Children

A warm and supportive parenting style reduces children's behavior problems across all situations, and it can be particularly powerful after divorce. The most important ingredients of this approach include using good listening skills, spending high-quality time together, and encouraging positive relationships with other important people in your child's life.

9. **Be a good listener and encourage your children to talk to you.** Show that you want to hear about their experiences and emotions. The following specific strategies can help:
 - Use "big ears"—look directly at your children when they are talking and give them your undivided attention.
 - Ask open-ended questions (e.g., "What?" and "How?" questions) that require more than a yes or no answer. These questions encourage children to share more and keep conversations going.
 - Help children share more by using short, simple responses that show that you are interested and want to learn more, such as nodding or saying "Uh huh," "Wow," or "Tell me more."
10. **Be a reliable source of support for your children's emotional experiences.** During times of transition,

they need to know that you are open and willing to listen and help.

- Let your children know that it is okay to talk about feelings. You can validate their experiences by letting them know that you see their feelings as okay and that you truly want to understand. For example, you can say, "I understand that you feel _____. Did I get that right?" And say "That makes sense." Keep in mind that young children, and sometimes older children (especially during periods of high stress), often show their emotions rather than talk about them. For example, a child who is anxious may cry more easily or cling to you more than usual.
 - Be patient. Expect that your children may need time to open up about how they are experiencing the divorce and adjusting to new family routines.
11. **Show your children how much you appreciate them and love them with your words and physical affection.** Give them hugs and kisses, sit close while sharing stories, or place a reassuring arm around their shoulders to let them know that you are there. Tell them that you will be the best parent you can be and that, despite many changes in the family, your love and commitment to them will never change.
 12. **Support your children's healthy coping.** Remind them to break tasks into small, manageable steps. Use good listening to help them plan how they will deal with difficult situations. Model how to effectively cope with stress. For example, you can give hopeful messages, such as "Things are difficult right now, but we are all going to be okay." Help them solve a problem, or teach them to take deep breaths to calm down when they are upset.
 13. **Be an "askable" parent.** Give gentle reminders that you want to listen while not pushing too hard (Long & Forehand, 2002). Anticipate and encourage questions about changes that will, or will not, occur in their lives following the divorce.
 14. **Spend high-quality time with your children.** Continuing family traditions or starting new ones that children can count on is an important way to help them feel more secure. Try to strike a balance between starting new and keeping old family traditions, rituals, and routines, such as in the following:
 - Family fun time is one way to build strong family bonds. For family fun time, parents

choose a weekly 1-hour block for the activity, and children choose an activity that is inexpensive and that everyone enjoys, such as having a picnic in the park or playing a board game. Some parents set phone reminders about family fun time or post it on a calendar for everyone to see.

- Set aside a brief (15 minutes) weekly time during which each child chooses an activity and you focus all your attention on that child. This is an effective way of showing your children that they matter to you and that you want to know more about their interests.

15. **Notice the behaviors, ideas, and qualities you appreciate most in your children.** Make a habit of catching your children doing good to boost their self-esteem, strengthen your relationship with them, and encourage desired behaviors.

16. **Encourage your children to have positive and strong relationships with important others.** Relationships can provide extra support and encouragement during difficult times. Consider the following ways to support healthy relationships:

- One of the biggest gifts you can give your children is the feeling that it is okay to love both their parents. Allow them to have positive relationships without having to choose or favor one parent over the other. Ensure that transitions between households are stress-free by being polite to the other parent and avoiding arguments.
- Support sibling and extended family relationships (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles). This might be particularly difficult if you do not get along with the other parent's family, but keep in mind that these individuals are important to your children.
- Keep your children's teachers and childcare providers up-to-date. Share recent or upcoming changes in pickup schedules and living arrangements right away. Check in with them regularly to find out how your children are doing at school (or in after-school care), and offer your perspective on how they are doing at home. Ask teachers to send information home to both parents to help everyone stay on the same page. Keeping both parents involved helps children succeed at school, and in many states both parents have legal access to school records (unless a judge orders otherwise).

Maintaining Structure, Predictability, and Rules

Many divorced parents have difficulty with rules, either because they do not want to be hard on their children or because they were not the rule enforcer before the divorce. However, stress is made worse, not reduced, when parents lower their expectations for their children's behaviors and responsibilities.

17. **Continue or establish effective family rules.**

Effective rules include clear and realistic expectations, reasonable and age-appropriate consequences, and consistent enforcement of consequences. Communicate these expectations clearly to your children so that they know what to expect, and be sure to select consequences that you can follow through with.

18. **Use positive reinforcement in place of punishment whenever possible.**

Rewards for positive choices are more powerful than negative consequences in changing children's behavior. For example, allow your children to earn a privilege, like extra TV time, for getting up for school on time rather than making them go to bed early as a consequence for sleeping late.

19. **Talk about changes in routines.** Reduce anxiety by providing details about the logistics of daily life (e.g., visitation schedules, school pickups). Before changes in living arrangements and routines occur, clearly tell your children not only what will change but also what will stay the same. When they will be switching to the other parent's house, many children benefit from the use of color-coded calendars, advance planning, and reminders the day before and the day of the change.

20. **Encourage your children to continue positive activities.** It can be helpful for children to continue participating in predivorce activities, such as practicing with the band, playing sports, and getting together with friends. These activities will give them a sense of stability and help them keep their mind off the divorce.

Caring for Yourself

Prioritizing your own emotional and physical needs will give you the strength and energy you need to be emotionally available to care for and support your children.

21. **Remind yourself that you are dealing with a lot of changes.** Give yourself time to figure out your new normal.

22. **Break tasks into small, manageable steps and reward yourself for small accomplishments.** For example, when you feel overwhelmed by a task, such as finding childcare during a school break, consider making a list of the small steps that are involved, do one at a time, and treat yourself to something you really enjoy after you complete the task.
23. **Lean on your support system.** Finding “adult ears”—people who care about you and are good listeners—not only provides the support you need, but also protects your children from hearing about conflict and discord between their parents.
24. **Combat thoughts that make you feel worse.** Negative thoughts, such as “Life will always be this hard,” make coping more difficult. Watch out for key black-and-white words such as *always* and *never*. Replace them with descriptors that are more balanced, such as *sometimes* or *right now*. Focusing on more realistic or optimistic interpretations of the events in life can help you feel better and manage stress more effectively.
25. **Take time out for yourself on a consistent basis.** It is important to reduce stress and increase your happiness by prioritizing time for activities that you personally value and find rewarding, such as exercise, meditation, hobbies, or activities with friends.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<http://familytransitions-ptw.com/>

This website offers two evidence-based programs for families experiencing divorce: a parenting program for divorced and separated parents (New Beginnings Program), and a Web-based child coping program (Children of Divorce - Coping with Divorce; CoD-CoD).

<http://www.uptoparents.org/>

This award-winning website, recognized by several professional organizations, contains resources for families experiencing parental divorce.

<http://www.afccnet.org/Portals/0/PDF/AzAFCC%20Coparenting%20Communication%20Guide.pdf>

The Co-Parenting Communication Guide is published by the Arizona Chapter of the Association

of Family and Conciliation Courts. It includes recommendations for Web- and app-based tools to aid communication between parents.

Books

Long, N. J., & Forehand, R. L. (2002). *Making divorce easier on your child: 50 effective ways to help children adjust*. Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books.

The authors offer clear and concise strategies to help children adjust after divorce.

Pedro-Carroll, J. (2010). *Putting children first: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive through divorce*. New York, NY: Penguin.

The author uses case examples to illustrate the effects of divorce on child adjustment and offers research-based strategies to help children adjust through all stages of the divorce process.

REFERENCES

- Amato, P. R. (2001). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15*(3), 355–370.
- Amato, P. R., & Sobolewski, J. M. (2001). The effects of divorce and marital discord on adult children's psychological well-being. *American Sociological Review, 66*, 900–921.
- Kelly, J. B. (2012). Risk and protective factors associated with child adolescent adjustment following separation and divorce. In K. Kuehnle & L. Drozd (Eds.), *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court* (pp. 49–84). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Long, N. J., & Forehand, R. L. (2002). *Making divorce easier on your child: 50 effective ways to help children adjust*. Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books.
- National Center for Health Statistics. (2008). Marriage and divorce. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm>
- Pedro-Carroll, J. (2010). *Putting children first: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive through divorce*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Sun, Y., & Li, Y. (2008). Stable postdivorce family structures during late adolescence and socioeconomic consequences in adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 70*, 129–143.

Wolchik, S. A., Schenck, C. E., & Sandler, I. N. (2009). Promoting resilience in youth from divorced families: Lessons learned from experimental trials of the New Beginnings Program. *Journal of Personality, 77*(6), 1833–1868.

Yannakoulia, M., Papanikolaou, K., Hatzopoulou, I., Efstathiou, E., Papoutsakis, C., & Dedoussis, G. V. (2008). Association between family divorce and children's BMI and meal patterns: The GENDAI Study. *Obesity, 16*(6), 1382–1387.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karey L. O'Hara, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow at Arizona State University's REACH Institute. Her research examines the effects of interparental conflict and youth coping on adjustment after parental divorce.

Sharlene A. Wolchik, PhD, and **Irwin Sandler, PhD**, are professors of psychology at Arizona State University. They are experts on family processes that promote child adjustment following parental divorce and developed the New Beginnings Program, which led to reduced problems for children up to 15 years after parent participation. As partners in Family Transitions—Programs That Work LLC, which trains and supports providers to deliver the New Beginnings Program, they declare a financial interest in the New Beginnings Program. Irwin Sandler also declares a conflict of interest in the CoD-CoD program.

© 2018, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270