

TALKING WITH A CHILD ABOUT DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

A divorce or separation is a relationship change that happens between adults, but it will have an impact on children in the family and can even impact children in extended families or neighborhoods. Here are some reminders of how to talk with children about the changes that may happen and feelings they may have when adults they love separate.

- Frame the divorce or separation as something that happens between grown-ups. You can help the child understand that the separation is not their fault, and that repairing the relationship is not their responsibility. Young children may be in a developmental stage of believing that what happens in their world is because of them. Older children may still have worries that something they said or did led to the divorce or separation. Reassure the child that they did not cause the divorce. And, let the child know that it is not their job to make adults love each other again, live together again, or get married again.
- Assure the child that they will still be loved and cared for. Give children specific information about who they will live with, and when they will see each adult.
- **Discuss the idea of change together.** Let the child know that some things may change, and other things may stay the same, and be as honest as you can about what those changes will be. You can let the child know you will be there for them as they adjust to the changes.
- Keep the child separate from conflict between the adults. When a child is present, only speak about those involved in a neutral or positive way. It can be confusing and hurtful when someone speaks negatively about a person whom the child loves. It can even negatively impact a child's own sense of self worth to hear deeply negative words about their loved one. If a child asks why a divorce or separation needs to happen, you can answer their question in simple terms with language like "I/we believe this is the best thing for our family." In cases of conflict or abuse in the adult relationship, it is enough to say something like "[other parent] and I have some really big grown-up problems. Our problems are our responsibility, and they are not about you."
- Ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions may help you to gain a better understanding of the child's needs. Allowing the child to talk about their feelings may give you a better idea of how you can help them.
- **Give the child clear, concrete answers to their questions.** Addressing a child's concerns as soon as possible can help prevent them from creating fantasy answers that may be more worrisome than actual answers. It is okay if you don't have an answer to a child's question you can let them know that you will answer their question as soon as you can, or offer to help find the answer together.
- **Be patient.** A child may have a lot of questions, may need you to repeat your answers to the same question, or may ask no questions at all. Be available to meet the child where they are as they understand and adjust to the divorce or separation. You can consistently let them know that you are there to hear their feelings and questions any time they have them.

WHAT A CHILD MAY FEEL

Experiencing a divorce can lead to a lot of feelings, and children will experience and express these feelings differently. Even when a child doesn't openly express all of their feelings, your presence lets them know that their feelings are safe with you. Here are some of the feelings a child may experience, and how you can help:

Sadness:

A child may feel sad about the changes that divorce may bring, such as the loss of the family as the child knew it. You can remind the child that it is normal to feel sad during this time and that they are not alone in feeling sad.

Anger:

A child may feel angry about the divorce or even angry at the individuals involved in the divorce. Although it can be hard to see a child's anger, you can help them process their anger in ways that are not harmful to themselves or others. Active physical play such as running, punching a pillow, yelling in a safe place outdoors, creating art, or writing are some ways you can show a child how to handle this hard but natural emotion.

Fear:

Fear is a common reaction to change. A child may feel scared about what will happen after the divorce and how life will change as a result. Be honest and clear about changes to the child's life from the first time you talk to the child about the separation. Let them know they can trust you to always tell them what will change and what will stay the same. Even though the changes might be difficult, knowing what they are and that an adult they love is supporting them and keeping them informed throughout the changes will help the child feel safe.

Guilt:

A child might wonder if they are responsible for the divorce. A child may also feel guilty about wanting to spend time with one adult more than the other. Assure the child that their feelings will not affect your love for them, that they are not responsible for the divorce, and that you are always open to hear their worries and hard feelings.

Relief:

A child may feel a sense of relief that things are changing if they have noticed the adults in their life were unhappy or if there was tension or conflict in the home. Relief may be a confusing feeling if the child also feels sad, angry, or worried about the changes to their family. Let the child know that all feelings, even if contradictory, are okay.

No Reaction:

A child may show no strong reactions to the divorce or separation. The child may simply not be ready to share feelings outwardly, or they might not yet fully understand what this change will mean for their family. Let the child know that you are there for them however they feel and ready to listen if they would like to talk.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

One of the very best ways to help a child through hard times is to simply be there for them. Here are some ideas for ways you can help a child through a difficult transition like separation:

Maintain consistency: During times of change and transition, predictable routines and the steady presence of an adult can help a child know they have some things and some people they can always rely on. It can be helpful to keep consistency in routines like meals and bedtimes whenever possible, even if some things have changed.

Talk about change: Let the child know they can always talk to you about the changes they feel in their life and relationships. You can also talk with the child about changes they have already experienced – like a new sibling, a move, or starting at a new school. All changes are different, but you can help a child explore what helped them adjust to other changes they have been through. You might even share about your own experience of a major change you experienced when you were young. Reminding a child about other transitions can help them see how they will adjust to this big change, too.

Be honest: Address the child's questions and concerns simply and openly using only information you know is true. If you do not know the answer yet, it is okay to let them know you don't have an answer but will find out or tell them when a decision is made. If you make any promises to the child, be sure they are promises you are able to keep.

Offer reassurance: Reassure the child that even though the adults in their life now have a different relationship with each other, those adults still love the child just the same.

Encourage play and interests: You can remind a child that it is okay and good for them to play, spend time with friends, and engage in their other interests just as they always have. Opportunities for play might help the children process this change and their feelings.

Support relationships with other adults: You can help the child identify some trusted adults that they can talk to about their feelings. Other adults, such as teachers, coaches, or family members, may be able to see how the child is feeling and offer support.

"Children need to know divorce is a grownup problem. When tragic things happen in a family, children naturally think it's because of something they did. It's important that they hear that it's not their fault."

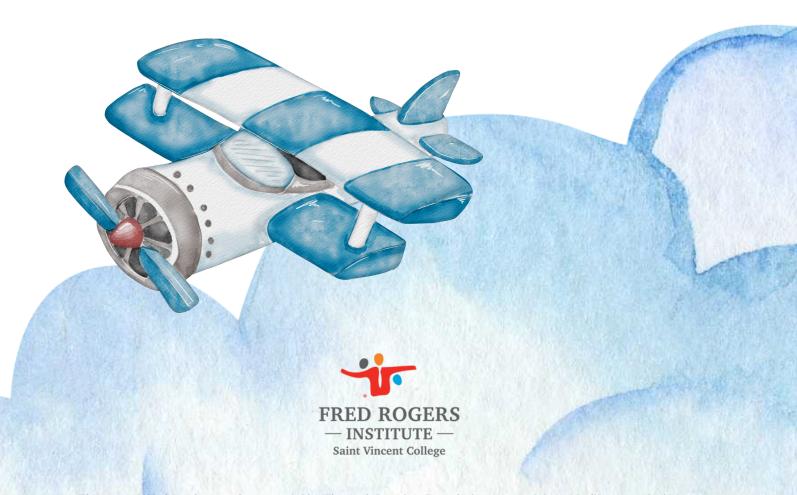




SUPPORT FOR THE JOURNEY

Divorce can be hard for everyone involved. It can be beneficial for both children and adults to find people and activities that offer them ways to think about and express their feelings.

- If you feel speaking with a professional may help, you can use **Child Parent Psychotherapy** to find a licensed therapist in your area.
- There are many services and resources specifically for children. You can speak with school counselors, religious leaders, and others in your community who may be able to help the child directly or recommend resources.
- If you feel there is an immediate crisis with a child or family, you can text **HOME** to **741741** to reach the Crisis Text Line and connect with a trained counselor.



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