



# Helping Children Deal with Stress after Divorce

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## Ron Cox

Assistant Professor, Human Development and Family Science

## Matt Brosi

Associate Professor, Marriage and Therapy

## Todd Spencer

Doctoral Student in Marriage and Family Therapy

Divorce can be a difficult experience for each family member. While you are adjusting to the changes brought by the divorce, it is important to remember that your children may be experiencing their own post-divorce stress. Sometimes it can be difficult to identify when children are struggling and how you can best help them cope with stress. Every family is unique and has its own experience, but regardless of your experience with divorce, there are some important things to remember about helping your children adjust in healthy ways.

## How Can Divorce Cause Children Stress?

For children, divorce is typically associated with decreased contact with at least one parent. This is difficult because the majority of children want to continue relationships with both parents. It is common for children to blame themselves for the divorce. This is most common in children younger than 6, but can occur at any age. In addition, the changes associated with divorce often disrupt the children's routine and increase the number of transitions they experience.

## Each Sibling May Experience or Show Stress Differently

Every child is unique and may exhibit stress differently. It is often difficult to know how your children are coping with the stressors of divorce because they may not talk about how they are feeling or adjusting. It is important to be sensitive to how the divorce is affecting each of your children.

Signs That Your Child May be Experiencing Significant Stress:

- Increased aggression or irritability
- Being clingy to trusted adults and more anxious around strangers
- Regressive behaviors begin to occur, like thumb-sucking and bed-wetting
- Often appearing sad, depressed or anxious
- Becoming more withdrawn
- Losing interest in activities they normally enjoy
- Increased disobedience or defiance to rules
- Difficulty transitioning and adjusting

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- Acting out in school or poor school performance
- Refusing to eat or overeating
- Frequent stomachaches, headaches or tiredness

## Three Ways Parents Can Help Children Cope with Stress

### Effective Parenting

Being an effective parent requires being warm and supportive as well as consistent with discipline. This is particularly true in helping children adjust to divorce. Being both supportive and consistent with rules helps children feel a greater sense of control and stability. It is common for parents after a divorce to feel hesitant about setting limits with children. However, children will adjust more quickly when there is predictable and consistent parenting.

### Nurturing the Parent-Child Relationship

How well children adjust after divorce is largely influenced by the quality of the relationship they have with their parents. You can strengthen the bond with your children through spending more one-on-one time with each child, maintaining family routines and communicating effectively. It is important for your children to feel like you care and understand why the divorce is difficult for them. Parents who learn to listen with



empathy to their children's concerns about the divorce help children process their emotions and ultimately adjust better and have a better relationship with both parents. By nurturing your relationship with your children, you are letting them know you will always love and support them. When children feel supported, they are able to cope better with stress.

### **Managing Conflict**

One of the most toxic things for children's adjustment to divorce is ongoing conflict between their parents. Children

typically love both parents, and when they witness arguments between their parents, it can damage the parent-child relationship. While it can be difficult to put aside past hurts and interact with a former spouse without conflict, parents who are able to put their children first and not argue in front of them will help reduce the amount of stress they experience.

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