

Ages and Stages of Understanding Divorce

What is Happening to My Family?

Children often have a difficult time making sense of adult issues. In some homes, parents do not hide the conflict well, and the children may be very aware of the marital problems. In other homes, parents may only talk about the marital issues when the children are not around. Within other homes, there are many scenarios that fall in-between. Children's understanding of divorce can vary greatly depending on their age and what they have seen and heard.

Ages and Stages of Understanding Divorce

The chart on the following pages will help you identify your child's stage of development, what thoughts and feelings they might be having about the divorce, and different approaches you can take to help your children adjust to divorce according to their developmental stage.

Child's Stage	What They Understand	Their Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors	What Parents Can Do
Infants (Ages 0-2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infants do not understand what is going on, but they can sense their parents' feelings and will react to them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fussier, more crying • Changes in sleeping or eating • Feelings similar to parent's feelings (mom is sad, baby is sad) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep normal schedules and routines • Respond to baby's needs with love and patience • Give baby loving touches and attention
Toddlers (Ages 2-4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toddlers understand a little more and may recognize a parent is no longer in the home • Toddlers do not understand why the divorce is happening • Toddlers lack ability to understand other people's perspective and have little concept of how long something will be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May experience anxiety when parent is not around • May lose some skills already learned (potty training, sleeping in bed alone) • May revert back to behaviors more babyish (thumb sucking, tantrums, hitting, biting) • Changes in sleeping and eating • May ask often when the other parent will come back home or when they will see the other parent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide physical and verbal reassurance of your love • Give child choices (do you want crackers or apples for a snack to help them feel a sense of control) • Give child clear, concise rules and instructions (hands are for helping, not hitting; color on your paper, not on the wall) • Develop consistency between routines of both parent's homes and communicate about major changes child is experiencing • Patiently answer child's questions, even if repeated over and over, to help the child feel secure

Child's Stage	What They Understand	Their Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors	What Parents Can Do
Preschool and Elementary (Ages 4-10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware that one parent is no longer in the home • Begin to understand parents will no longer be married or live together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will likely blame themselves for the divorce • May worry about the changes in their daily lives • May have nightmares • May exhibit signs of sadness • May blame one parent • May fantasize about parents getting back together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell them often the divorce is not their fault • Reassure them of how their needs will be met and who will take care of them • Talk with them about their thoughts and feelings • Be sensitive to their fears and worries • Be supportive of the child's relationship with the other parent • Have consistent routines
Preteens and Adolescents (Ages 11-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand what divorce means but may have difficulty accepting the reality of the changes it brings to their family • Although thinking is more complex, they may still blame themselves for the divorce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May feel abandoned by the parent who moved out of the house • May withdraw from friends and favorite activities • May act out in uncharacteristic ways (using bad language, becoming rebellious) • May question their own beliefs about love, marriage and family • May feel the need to take on more responsibility to help out the family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use "I Statements" to communicate with your child (See page 63) • Maintain open lines of communication and really listen to your child's feelings and thoughts • Stay involved in child's activities and life • Maintain family rituals and routines • Show appreciation for their contributions to the family

