

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 3

NOVEMBER 2003

HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO DIVORCE

How common is divorce?

Unfortunately, divorce is a common occurrence. Over 1 million children experience their parents' divorce each year in the United States. Furthermore, in the U.S., about 40% of children will live with a divorced parent before they turn 16. Although divorce is a worldwide issue, the divorce rate in the U.S. is higher than in almost any other country. While children of all ages experience divorce, divorce most commonly affects young children because couples tend to divorce relatively early in their marriages.

Myths about divorce:

- *Divorce is harmful to all children.*

While it is true that nearly all children feel sad, confused, or angry about their parents' divorce, most children adjust to divorce and do not have lasting problems. For some children, however, the adjustment is more difficult. About one out of four children experiences serious problems, such as emotional or behavioral problems, difficulties at school or with friends, or alcohol or drug use.

- *Children never adjust to the divorce.*

It often takes families about two years to adjust to divorce. After this transition time, most children do well and about half of mothers say they feel closer to their children than they did before the divorce. However, it is important for parents to know that some children continue to experience problems a long time after divorce when they are teenagers and adults.

- *There is nothing that parents can do to help their children adjust to divorce.*

Although parents cannot control many things that can happen during and after divorce, there are many things that parents *can* do to help their children during this transition.

What can I do as a parent?

- ❑ Spend quality time with your children. Find time to do things together that you both enjoy, even if it is only a few minutes.
- ❑ Listen to your children. Allow your children to express their feelings about the divorce and talk openly about questions and concerns they have.
- ❑ Reassure your children. Tell them that the divorce is not their fault, that it's not their job to "fix" things, and that you will always be there for them.
- ❑ Provide structure and discipline. All children need to know what behavior is appropriate and what is not. Set clear rules and enforce them consistently. Although being consistent is especially difficult for parents during times of stress, this is precisely when children need structure the most.
- ❑ Support your children's relationship with your ex-spouse. In almost all cases, it is best for children to have a close relationship with both of their parents.

- ❑ Handle matters directly with your ex-spouse. Communicate directly with your ex-spouse about visits with your children, child support, legal issues, and other matters. Do not have your child serve as a messenger or a go-between.
- ❑ Take care of yourself. The only way for you to help your child during this time is to make sure that you get all the support that you need. Ask for support from friends and family. Remember to take some time for yourself everyday. You could read a book, listen to music, talk with friends, or just spend a few minutes in silence. Your children will benefit in many ways if you take care of yourself during the difficult times associated with divorce.

What should I avoid doing?

- ❑ Avoid arguing with your ex-spouse in front of your children.
- ❑ Avoid criticizing or “bad mouthing” your ex-spouse.
- ❑ Avoid asking your children about your ex-spouse, such as details about his/her new romantic partner.
- ❑ Avoid depending on your children for support or help in dealing with your own feelings about the divorce.

When should I seek professional help?

It is normal for children to have short-term negative reactions to divorce. If your child’s problems start to interfere with how he or she is doing at school or with friends and family, then you might want to seek professional help. Because divorce is a major transition for everyone, many parents find that parenting programs, support groups, or counseling can be very helpful.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212)263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-2479.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, AboutOurKids.org.



Changing the Face of Child Mental Health NYU Child Study Center

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The Parent Letter has received generous support from the following donors: Joseph Healy and Thomas Walker