

## **Because Life Goes On...Helping Children and Youth Live With Separation and Divorce**

### **A Child's Age and Stage of Development Make a Difference**

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/mh-sm/divorce/4-eng.php?option=print>

Although all children, pre-teens and teenagers share many of the same developmental goals and needs - such as a deep need to trust other people and their world - their particular age and stage of development are major factors in determining their reaction to any situation.

Awareness of how children and teenagers grow and develop can help you predict how your children's behaviour may change and the kind of support they will need.

This section of the booklet is designed to help you:

- better understand the developmental needs and goals in each stage of your child's life
- anticipate and respond to your child's needs
- identify signs that your child may be feeling increased stress.

For each stage of development - from infancy to adolescence - you will find specific information about:

- divorce
- how children's development affects their feelings and reactions about separation and what you can do to help your children adapt and grow
- how to modify your parenting style as children grow up.

You may find it helpful to review the information contained under each stage of development, regardless of your children's ages. Reading the entire section may help you gain an understanding of how children change as they develop, helping you to anticipate your children's needs and changing behaviours. Also, every child is unique: the way children react and the way you can respond may not "fit" their age categories precisely. Keep in mind that some feelings and needs occur during several stages of a child's development. And finally, remember that what works for one child at one stage may be equally helpful for another child at a different stage.

#### **Infants and Toddlers (Birth-2 years)**

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There is incredible growth in children's development during the first two years of life. From birth, children quickly learn to understand a great deal of what is being said and happening

around them. Physical development also proceeds rapidly, from crawling to running. Although these changes give children a sense of independence, they still rely almost totally on their parents. Infants and toddlers may become upset when the parent who takes care of them the most often leaves, if only to move into another room in the home. Being apart from this parent for just a few hours, even when the child is left with someone familiar, can be stressful.

During this critical stage of development, infants and toddlers need plenty of stimulation and loving attention. When babies receive warm, responsive care, they are more likely to feel safe and secure with the adults who take care of them. Very young children can sense the feelings of an upset parent and can become upset themselves. At any age, children are very vulnerable to the anxious and troubled feelings of their parents.

Despite rapid progress in learning to think, infants and toddlers still have a limited understanding of their world. Changes in routine and conflict between parents are bewildering and painful for very young children. Their lives can feel unpredictable, confusing and at times frightening after their parents separate.

### **Parental Conflict Is Harmful**

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Many parents don't realize how upsetting continued conflict with their former partner can be to infants and toddlers. You may assume that because very young children cannot understand the arguments they hear, they will be unaffected by them. In fact, although toddlers rarely understand the details of angry words between parents, they feel the emotions very strongly. It is important that you try to keep a calm, positive attitude in your child's presence.

### **Separation from Parents Is Difficult**

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Separation from a parent is difficult no matter what the circumstances. Attachment to a caregiver is key to an infant's healthy development. As long as there are no prolonged separations or serious threats to a baby's health, the baby will form an attachment to the main caregivers. Therefore, maintaining a strong bond with both parents is important for infants and toddlers. Frequent contact with the parent who no longer lives at home can help young children feel more secure. Parents who do not live with their children need to be patient with toddlers, giving them time to become reacquainted with each stay. Sometimes, the toddler's initial shyness is misinterpreted as a lack of love. The parent is understandably hurt and discouraged and may see the toddler less and less, which makes the problem worse. More contact - not less - may help. It may also be helpful for the child to keep a photograph of the other parent. Both parents should do their best to help the toddler feel comfortable with parental visits.

### **Signs of Possible Trouble**

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Watch for signs that indicate a young child is experiencing difficulties - waking during the night, wetting the bed, not eating, aggressive behaviour, loss of language skills, loss of toilet training. ("Reactions to Stress.") Infants and toddlers get angry when they are frustrated. Expect temper tantrums when schedules are disrupted, when enjoyable activities are cut short or are less frequent, and when they must wait to be fed, read to, cuddled or played with. Other indicators of distress include fearfulness and changes in mood, such as over-reaction to minor frustrations, withdrawal and listlessness.

### **Follow a Routine**

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Infants and toddlers need consistency and predictability in their daily life. Once parenting and child care arrangements have been made, it is up to the parent to maintain consistency in the child's schedule:

- the time of day the child is dropped off and picked up should be kept as regular as possible
- routines such as mealtimes, bedtimes and early morning rituals reinforce children's feelings of comfort and security
- try not to change a baby or toddler's personal environment (familiar surroundings, toys and blankets).

### **Preschoolers (3-5 years)**

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The preschool years bring rapid intellectual, physical and emotional growth. The developmental goal of a preschooler is to become independent.

Despite their considerable physical and emotional achievements, preschoolers have a limited ability to understand separation and divorce. For example, because they understand relationships in self-centred terms, children may feel that they are the cause of certain events. Children often believe that a parent's worries and anxieties, and perhaps even the divorce itself, are their fault.

### **Active Imaginations**

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Children between the ages of 3 and 5 also find it hard to tell the difference between what is real and what is imaginary. This means that they may become confused. Children may think that they are being abandoned by their mother, unloved by their father or that they are being punished for angry feelings. Preschool children are very curious and will actively try to understand the changes in their lives. They now have the ability to try to find answers themselves, and will ask "Why?" "How come?" and "What if?" This ability to understand some events may add to their worries.

Preschoolers are fond of listening to and creating their own "tall tales." They love to exaggerate stories, and they often believe the story they have just told. Parents should not confuse this with lying; in fact, you can use these stories as a way to exchange information and build better understanding. (See "Communicating Effectively with Your Children, Pre-teens and Teenager.")

### **The Need for Mother and Father**

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A preschool child's sense of social and emotional independence is not fully developed. Preschoolers continue to rely on their parents and a secure home base to feel safe. At this stage, children need nurturing from both parents - they are beginning to develop a relationship with their father that is different from the one with their mother. Children experience a significant loss when one parent is less involved in their lives. Not only will they often miss that parent's presence and affection, but some of their physical and emotional needs may not be met. They often have overwhelming fears that both parents will leave them. As with infants and toddlers, preschoolers need lots of visits with the parent who has moved away. Parents need to keep this in mind when they develop their parenting plan.

### **Personality Is a Major Factor**

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Personality is a major factor in development and plays an important role in a child's reaction to divorce. By the time children are 3 to 5 years of age, most parents can recognize the ways their children cope with stress. Some children sulk, others "talk back" or get angry, still others become overly submissive or obedient. It may be helpful to understand that when children are unable to express emotion and cope with stress in their usual ways, they try different approaches. Children who are usually outspoken or talkative may suddenly become withdrawn, and those who are usually submissive or obedient may suddenly become uncooperative.

Parents need to resist any temptation to let a submissive or obedient child become their caretaker or to ignore the child who makes fewer demands. It is also important to resist simply punishing an angry and disagreeable child instead of trying to deal with his or her underlying unhappiness.

### **Reactions to Stress**

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A young child's distress is often shown by returning to behaviours that have been outgrown. Problem areas may include:

- sleep - a return to bed wetting or recurrent bad dreams, avoiding going to bed
- eating - eating less or more than usual or refusing favourite foods
- physical activity - giving up drawing or riding a tricycle

language - returning to baby talk  
emotional development - reverting to crying, clinging; or thumb sucking  
social relationships - refusing to play with other children.

Preschoolers can display a wide range of emotional behaviour in a short time. Anger is the most common way for preschoolers to show pain and distress. Hitting, kicking, throwing things, pinching and spitting at other children are common ways for young children to express anger. These expressions of anger toward friends or brothers and sisters often represent the child's disturbance or anger at the separation or divorce.

Fearfulness is also a sign of anxiety or tension in preschoolers, particularly when it is in response to events the child used to feel comfortable with. Troubled preschoolers may also show sadness, withdrawal or lack of energy.

Many of these feelings and responses in preschoolers can be related just to growing up. They do not, in themselves, indicate trouble. However, if they are unusually intense, last a long time or interfere significantly with a child's life, they may be signs of distress.

### **Reducing Stress**

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You can help your preschooler adapt to separation and divorce by reducing the sources of your child's distress, and by providing reassurance, stability and comfort. Talking regularly about their feelings, fears and fantasies helps your children to work through their private, internal sources of distress. This requires you to listen closely to your preschoolers, observe their actions and respond by communicating with care and understanding.

### **Child Care Arrangements**

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Knowing with confidence who will take care of them, and where, provides preschoolers with feelings of stability and security. You can help by:

selecting a regular setting for child care  
letting the child take familiar objects to the child care setting, such as stuffed animals, a prized blanket or toys  
maintaining a regular schedule for dropping off and picking up your child at the child care setting  
keeping consistent morning, dinnertime and bedtime routines.

If at all possible, it is helpful for you to keep your existing child care arrangements, at least during the beginning stages of separation and divorce. A familiar routine creates a feeling of

security for children. When this schedule is disrupted, preschoolers may become upset. If changes in the daily schedule are unavoidable or necessary, you should explain the reasons for the changes. You can also help your preschoolers adjust by going with them to visit the new child care setting before they are dropped off for the first time.

### **Early Elementary School Children (6-8 years)**

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Although children of this age are forming outside friendships and attachments, the family is still the central influence in their lives. Like younger children, early elementary school children need time with both parents, or with role models of both genders. The relationship with the parent who no longer lives with them is very important to children at this age.

Early elementary school children are beginning to understand that parental conflicts are separate from themselves. Yet at the same time, they still base much of their self-image on how they and others perceive their parents. That's because children at this age are developing a keen sensitivity to what others might think about them or how they might judge them.

### **Use of Denial and Other Defences**

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Denial, in simple terms, means refusing to admit to yourself that you are hurting, or that anything is wrong. Denial is a typical reaction of younger elementary school children to separation and divorce. Children may also become angry and frustrated and bicker with brothers, sisters or classmates, or they may become stubborn and uncooperative at home. These are short-term attempts to cope with their own emotional pain, but neither denial nor anger is an effective defence in the long run. Denial prevents children from accepting and dealing with a difficult situation, while anger usually gets them into trouble with adults and peers at home and at school. Most importantly, neither of these defences helps children overcome their sadness.

Unexplained headaches and stomach aches can be the result of anger or anxiety. Fear and anxiety can also be shown in nervous habits, such as biting nails, rather than fear of a specific event or object.

### **Increased Capacity for Thinking**

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Children in early elementary school are learning to form complex thoughts. This results in the ability to imagine other future realities. For children whose parents divorce, this can mean that fantasies, such as being abandoned by the parent they live with, are more likely to arise. These fantasies worry children and heighten their distress over separation and divorce. If a parent remarries, children at this age may fear being replaced by a new baby.

## **A Strong Sense of Family**

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Early elementary school children have an increased understanding of their place in the family and how their family fits into society. As a result, their identity remains strongly tied to belonging to a family. Not only are their separate relationships with each parent important, but a love of and trust in their family have begun to emerge. Separation and divorce disturbs the feeling of family that is so important to children of this age.

## **Feelings of Loss**

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Deep feelings of loss and sadness are the primary features of the process of separation and divorce for young elementary school children. These feelings can come from:

- the loss of peace in the household because of parental conflict
- the loss of security when a parent becomes anxious or upset
- the change in or loss of a relationship with the parent who moves away
- a more distant relationship with the parent they live with because of increased work on the job and at home, or a new adult relationship or remarriage
- the loss of contact with grandparents and other extended family members
- the loss of a sense of stability, control over events and confidence
- the fear that their parents' divorce makes them different from their peers.

## **Prolonged Parental Hostility**

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As with children of all ages, strong or long-term hostilities between separating parents are a major source of stress for early elementary school children. Children at this stage of development are especially vulnerable to fantasies about what might happen when parents become angry, and they often worry that they may have caused their parents' marital troubles.

Early elementary school children want to help their distressed parent. Being needed by a parent makes them feel big, important and loved. Yet children also want their "same old" parent back, so that the parent can resume caring for "me." Children who are allowed to take on too much responsibility for taking care of their parents are robbed of many of the fun, carefree and spontaneous times that belong to childhood. They may develop into "little adults" who feel responsible and who cannot experience carefree times.

## **Communication Is Important**

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Parents can help early elementary school children adjust to the process of separation and divorce by talking clearly with them. Indirect communication may also help - stories about other children who have gone through divorce can help your child see how some other children cope and help her realize that she is not alone. Tell your children the reasons for the divorce, using an approach and language that's appropriate to their age. Sometimes, it may not be wise to tell them the specific reasons and the details. (See page 12 for some examples of how to talk with your children about divorce.) Assure them over and over again that the divorce is not their fault.

Many parents hesitate to have the first talk with their children because they don't want to hurt them. However, some pain is unavoidable. Children may already be sad and upset by their parents' arguing and by a general feeling of stress and tension. They may feel relieved by finding out what is really going on, and what is going to happen to them.

The first talk is an opportunity for you to take responsibility for the problems. It allows your child to know what to expect, and to feel relieved that the arguments may come to an end.

Children need to know exactly what will happen to them. The more information you can give them, the better. Children want to know: where they will live and with whom - whether the home is changing or not, they need reassurance of where home will be

how often and where they will see the other parent - including the kinds of activities they may do together and what the limitations are, if any  
any changes to the family's schedule or routine, such as a parent returning to work or new chores  
how their sisters and brothers will be affected - for example, will all of the children spend time together with the other parent, or just separately?

If a change of school is unavoidable, give your children every opportunity to learn about the new school before they start. Also, if one of you is planning a major move, give your children as much time as possible to handle this change in their lives.

### **Encouraging Discussion**

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It is particularly important for early elementary school children to have opportunities to talk about their feelings and ask questions about the divorce and what will happen to their family. As hurt and upset as you may be, it is important to put aside this pain when you talk to your children. Assure them that most children have all sorts of feelings when their parents divorce, and that these feelings are okay.

## **Asking for Help**

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Ask teachers and other caregivers to watch for changes in the actions and attitudes of your child. The more you know about your child during this transition, the better able you are to help him or her adjust.

## **Pre-teens (9-12 years)**

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Significant social and emotional growth gives pre-teens an increasing sense of independence. This feeling of independence means they place greater importance on the world outside their family. They have greater involvement in school, friendships and extra-curricular activities.

Pre-teens have a growing understanding of human relationships and a realistic understanding of divorce. But although they understand more, they are still not able to deal emotionally with everything they experience. During this period, children are forming an internal code of moral values, largely based on what they learn from parents and other adults.

## **Social Withdrawal**

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Social withdrawal is a common sign of worry or fear among pre-teens. Relationships with other children and friends are crucial to the social and emotional growth of children at this age. Lack of involvement in activities with other children outside school or a change in social groups may be a signal to parents that a child is troubled.

## **Helplessness Turns into Anger**

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Pre-teens will frequently convert feelings of helplessness and sadness into anger. Anger helps prevent them from feeling unhappy and emotionally vulnerable - it's a way of dealing with their pain. Some pre-teens may show aggression, either directly through physical fighting with schoolmates and brothers and sisters, or in bitter, verbal attacks directed at one or both parents. Or a child may argue heatedly with you or complain about curfews, television rules and having to do household chores. Your pre-teen's conflicts may also be expressed as physical problems - headaches or stomach aches that are very real and painful.

## **A Need to Please**

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Pre-teens may also try to cope by maintaining good relationships with both parents at all costs. They may try to gain praise and attention by being overly attentive and helpful to one or both parents and at school. By showing so much self-control and sympathy, they often sacrifice their own needs, assertiveness and strength of character.

## **Developmental Needs Neglected**

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Although children of this age long to be treated like adults, parents need to resist the temptation to involve them in adult problems. For example, letting them choose the colour of paint for their room is far different from involving them in financial affairs. While many children are willing to provide support to their parents, they are too young to take on this kind of responsibility. Be aware that children who grow up "taking care of their parents" run the risk of emotional difficulties later in life. To make sure your children's developmental needs are being met at this age, encourage them to make friends and to take part in activities outside the family.

## **Emotional Costs of Conflict**

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As with children of any age, the emotional costs of allowing pre-teens to become directly involved in adult conflicts can be considerable and long lasting. Pre-teens experience conflicting loyalties. They may experience strong feelings of guilt, disloyalty and fear. When parents draw children into the conflict, it places children in the unbearable position of choosing one parent over the other. Children of this age are not ready to handle this power or cope with the stress it creates.

## **New Adult Relationships**

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When a parent begins to see someone new, pre-teens must deal with the reality that the parent will have less time and energy for them. They may:

- confuse having less of their parent's time with having less of their parent's love
- consider their parents "still married"
- not be ready to recognize their parent's sexuality - they have difficulty imagining their parents in a sexual relationship
- feel conflict about whether they should enjoy being with their parent's new partner.

## **A Wide Variety of Defences**

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Pre-teens use more elaborate defences than younger children. For example, they may show their fears in ways that do not make them appear vulnerable or in need of help. It may seem that they are upset at someone else - another child, family member or teacher - or are not experiencing trouble or anger. Depending on the maturity level of your child, it may - or may not - be helpful for you to confront these defences directly. For example, some 9 year olds think and act like they are going on 15 years of age, while others seem to act their age. Use your

judgment based on how your pre-teen has responded in the past. If direct communication about their defences or feelings might be interpreted as threatening or invasive, you may want to approach the topic through indirect communication, such as talking about the feelings of characters in a movie. Some defences pre-teens may use are:

- denying feelings, such as discussing upsetting events in an unemotional way
- displacing feelings, such as fighting with friends and other children instead of showing anger at a parent
- becoming overly devoted to a parent
- idealizing and identifying with the absent parent.

### **Pre-teens Need Reassurance and Support**

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Parents sometimes think it's not necessary to explain divorce to their pre-teens because they are mature enough to see for themselves what is happening. Despite the apparent "sophistication" of some children this age, it isn't true.

Children naturally turn to their parents for understanding, reassurance and support in difficult times. When you do not discuss your separation and divorce, children are cut off from their basic way of coping with their questions, worries and troublesome feelings. You can explain the separation and divorce to your pre-teens in a manner which reflects their level of maturity. Some pre-teens are young for their age and might relate better to communication styles appropriate for younger elementary school children, while other pre-teens might respond best to a direct approach that is best suited for teenagers (see page 14).

Pre-teens need you to show your commitment in concrete ways. When you make time to attend school meetings, performances and athletic events, it shows your children that you are there for them. You can help your children build confidence and self-esteem - encourage them to develop their interests in school, sports and arts, help them make new friends, and acknowledge their new-found strengths and growing maturity.

Parents should continue to enforce reasonable limits, rules and curfews - pre-teens need structure and routine to feel secure. Relaxing the rules to compensate for feelings of guilt over the separation and divorce often leads to further problems.

Other adults can serve as allies and role models for your pre-teens. Find opportunities for your children to spend time with other trusted adults, such as relatives, neighbours or teachers.

### **Teenagers (13-17 years)**

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During adolescence, teenagers are learning to define who they are and to develop their own values, priorities and goals. Teenagers are also gaining a sense of belonging to a community and to the world around them. In short, teenagers are developing their own identity, a unique identity that is separate from that of their parents.

It's tough being a teenager, even under the best of circumstances. Teenagers have lots of questions, and you may not have all the answers. The teenage years are a time of great change, which adds to confusion and stress. Emotionally, teenagers try to adapt to physical and social changes while trying to become more independent from their parents. More than ever, teenagers need emotional support, love and firm guidance from their parents as they confront these considerable challenges. Despite their physical maturity (and claims for independence) teenagers still need their parents.

Most teenagers see their parents as having positive qualities as well as limitations and faults. After separation or divorce, teenagers may begin to see their parents only in negative terms. Teenagers often have difficulty understanding how their parents could have let their relationship deteriorate. They may begin to perceive their parents as selfish, stupid, weak or cruel. These impressions are often strengthened as children watch their parents fight or grieve.

### **Conflicting Emotions**

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Because of the confusion and turmoil of the teenage years, stability in their lives is important. This is why parents' separation or divorce is one of the most difficult life events for a teenager. However, compared to younger children, they have greater resources to help them handle those challenges.

When parents divorce, teenagers experience two sets of changes: those that happen before the separation and divorce, and those that occur during the process itself. They are often genuinely shocked to learn that their parents are separating. Although they usually have been aware of tension between their parents, most teenagers do not believe that they will actually divorce. Surprise and shock are quickly followed by anger and sadness. Teenagers do not like having their lives disrupted. And they are often disappointed because their parents could not keep the family together. Teenagers often recognize their own feelings, but rarely understand exactly why they are angry, sad or intensely critical of their parents.

Teenagers may feel some of these common conflicts:

anger at one parent or both parents, versus love for both parents  
loyalty to both parents, versus the tendency to take sides or choose one parent over the other

affection for a parent's new partner, versus anxiety over sexuality in the parent's adult relationship  
giving the appearance that everything is fine, versus the need to be cared for and protected.

Teenagers experience other difficulties as well. They may see the separation as "proof" that the parent who leaves does not really love them or want to be with them. Teenagers are also vulnerable because their parents may try to use them as spies and messengers, but they may also strongly reject this role as well.

### **Anger: A Common and Visible Emotion**

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Teenagers are sometimes overwhelmed by their own anger. Intense conflicts between parents can be very upsetting to them. They find it difficult to admit that their parents put themselves in such unpleasant circumstances and that they hurt each other so much. Teenagers may also learn from arguing parents that the uncontrolled expression of anger is acceptable (or the opposite - that anger should be concealed or disguised). Troubled teenagers often express anger toward parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, friends, other children and physical objects. Fighting, destruction of property, and yelling and screaming are the clearest examples of anger in action. Drug and alcohol abuse, withdrawal or refusal to participate in activities, poor grades, skipping school, stealing and poor eating habits are often the result of anger, although the teenager may not be aware that anger is motivating this behaviour.

"... At first I didn't know how to get angry. I didn't know if I should just talk about it or if I should scream. Because I never really talked about the divorce with my friends. I just never thought that anybody would really understand." MELISSA, 17

### **Other Common Responses**

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In addition to anger, teenagers may also:

- feel a great amount of stress
- develop a fear of the future
- feel an exaggerated need to organize their world
- question the concept of marriage and whether it can last
- worry if they will ever be able to have happy relationships themselves
- perceive parental dating as a threat or resist a parent's new partner.

### **Direct Communication Is Best**

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Although younger children often benefit from indirect communication, teenagers can cope with the news better if both parents discuss the separation and divorce directly with them. It is best

for you to talk with teenagers together with any younger children in the family, and then again separately. This helps teenagers feel that their increasing maturity is recognized.

Parents should talk realistically about the divorce and what they think it will mean to the everyday life of their teenagers. Parents can stress the need for mutual patience and sensitivity; just as it takes time for teenagers to adapt, parents don't "have it all worked out" either.

Direct communication and a willingness to compromise on some issues of disagreement will help teenagers adapt to their new circumstances and continue the regular growth and development of adolescence. A sensitive balance of direct communication, negotiation which acknowledges their needs while setting reasonable limits, and respect for their growing independence will be most effective.

### **Help Teenagers Keep Their Friends**

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It usually helps to keep teenagers in their current school where they have already developed a network of friends. Some of these friends may have experienced divorce in their own family. Make sure that teenagers see their friends regularly, and that the separation and divorce process does not take up all of their time and energy. It's natural for teenagers, regardless of whether their parents are together or separated, to sometimes choose to spend time with friends or extended family members rather than with a parent. If there is a move to a new location or long trips between their parents' residences, teenagers will need to make new friends and adapt to new situations, which can make this life event even more difficult and stressful. It will take time for them to adjust.