

Dealing with Separation and Divorce

Research shows that the quality of caregiving in the first three years of life affects a person's social competence and academic achievement throughout life. So what happens when two of those caregivers (a young child's parents) are no longer living together, but choose to separate or divorce? How can families and other caregivers help ensure that the child will continue to have secure attachments, feel loved and cared for, and not experience too much stress from the situation?



Possible responses by young children to their parents' separation and/or divorce

- **In infants:** unusual fussiness and irritability, clinginess, difficulty being comforted, preference for one parent over the other, separation anxiety, gastrointestinal problems, changes in sleep patterns
- **In toddlers and preschoolers:** same as for infants, plus constant questioning about when the other parent is coming (because of little understanding of time), worries about who will take care of them and whether the parent they live with will

leave too, mood shifts, developmental regression and acting out behavior, worries that he or she is at fault, curiosity about the absent parent

Tips for helping a child adjust to separation and/or divorce

- See the world through the child's eyes; imagine what it must be like not to understand what's happening.
- Maintain normal daily routines as much as possible.

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- Offer reassurance that both parents will still love and care for the child.
- Respond to the child's needs in predictable ways.
- Communicate with the other parent so that there is consistency in routines no matter where the child is.
- Create opportunities for the child to be with each parent on a regular basis (except in cases of abuse).
- Be consistent about expectations, resisting the common tendency to become more or less strict.
- Reassure the child that the separation or divorce is not the child's fault.
- Encourage the child to express his or her feelings, perhaps through play or artwork.
- Be honest and explain in simple language how the new arrangements will work.
- Allow the child to ask questions.

R E S O U R C E S

Children and Divorce, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry;
<http://bit.ly/2YwRevT>

Helping Children Cope with Divorce or Separation, A WorkLife4You Guide,
<http://www.mftonlineceus.com/ceus-online/scb-divorce/SCB-Children-Cope-Divorce-Separation.pdf>

Helping Infants and Toddlers Adjust to Divorce, University of Missouri Extension Services; <http://extension.missouri.edu/GH6607>

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at PAIECMH@pakeys.org with questions or concerns.

