

Surviving Divorce

A Guide for Families Navigating One of Life's Hardest Seasons

For Parents • For Children • For the Journey Ahead

Divorce is one of the most disorienting experiences a family can go through. It touches everything — where you live, how you parent, how you see yourself, and how your children understand the world. There is no way to make it painless. But there is a way to go through it with integrity, and to give your children the best possible foundation for what comes next.

This guide is for parents and family members navigating divorce — with your children's wellbeing at the center.



First Things First: What Children Need to Know

Children do not need to understand divorce to be affected by it. They pick up on everything — the tension, the tears, the hushed conversations. One of the most important things you can do early on is tell them the truth in age-appropriate language, and answer the questions they are actually asking.

What Every Child Fears When Parents Divorce

- That it is their fault
- That one or both parents will stop loving them
- That their life as they know it is over
- That they will have to choose between their parents
- That they are the only ones who feel this way

What Every Child Needs to Hear — Repeatedly

- › “This is not your fault. Nothing you did caused this.”
- › “We both love you, and that will never change.”
- › “You will never have to choose between us.”
- › “You are allowed to love both of us. We want you to.”
- › “We are still your family — we just look different now.”
- › “It is okay to feel sad, angry, confused, or scared. All of those feelings are normal.”



Key principle: *Children can cope with painful realities when they are told the truth with love. What damages them is not the divorce itself but the conflict, instability, and emotional unavailability of parents that often surrounds it. Your ability to remain emotionally present is the most protective factor you can offer.*



Protecting Your Children from the Conflict

The research is unambiguous: children are not harmed by the fact of divorce nearly as much as they are harmed by witnessing or being caught in ongoing parental conflict. The single most protective thing you can do for your child is to keep them out of your conflict with your former spouse, even when it is extraordinarily difficult.

✓ Do This	✗ Avoid This
Speak about the other parent neutrally, or not at all, in front of your child	Criticize, mock, or speak negatively about the other parent where your child can hear
Use a mediator, attorney, or mutual friend to work through disputes	Use your child as a messenger between you and your former spouse
Let your child know they can love the other parent freely	Make your child feel guilty for enjoying time with the other parent
Keep adult information — finances, legal matters, reasons — between adults	Share adult grievances, legal details, or your pain with your child
Coordinate consistently on routines, rules, and major decisions	Undermine the other parent's decisions or rules in front of your child
Reassure your child that both homes are safe	Pump your child for information about the other household

"The way you speak about your child's other parent is the way your child learns to speak about half of themselves."



A critical reminder: *If your child is in a situation involving domestic violence, abuse, or genuine safety concerns, the guidance above about co-parenting and neutrality does not override your obligation to protect them. Safety first — always. Reach out to a counselor, attorney, or domestic violence resource for specific guidance.*



Understanding How Children Experience Divorce by Age

Children's understanding of divorce — and their emotional responses to it — change significantly as they develop. What a four-year-old needs to hear is different from what a fourteen-year-old needs. Here is a guide to what to expect and how to help at each stage.

Age	What They May Feel	What Helps
Under 5	Confusion, clinginess, regression (bedwetting, thumb-sucking), fear of abandonment, magical thinking that parents will reunite	Consistent routines, physical comfort, simple and repeated reassurance. Keep objects from both homes available. Do not overload with explanations.
Ages 5–12	May blame themselves, feel loyalty conflicts, grieve the loss of the intact family, try to be “good enough” to fix it, become school-avoidant or aggressive	Clear, age-appropriate honesty. Maintain as much routine stability as possible. Let them ask questions. Validate their sadness without minimizing it.
Tweens 12–14	Anger, withdrawal, shame with peers, taking sides, parentification (taking care of the distressed parent), academic decline	Firm boundaries around what is and isn’t their responsibility. Protect them from adult information. Keep them connected to peers and activities.
Teens 15–18	May appear unbothered but internally grieving. Risk of substance use, sexual risk-taking, or complete emotional shutdown. May prematurely leave home.	Give them more honest information than younger children, but still keep adult conflict away from them. Stay connected even if pushed away. Watch for warning signs.



Caring for Yourself So You Can Care for Them

You cannot pour from an empty cup. The most important parenting tool you have right now is your own emotional stability. Children of divorce who fare best are not those whose parents were perfect — they are those whose parents were regulated, present, and honest.

Your grief, anger, and exhaustion are real and valid. They need an outlet. The question is where that outlet goes.

What Helps You Helps Them

- Pursue your own counseling or therapy — you should not be processing this alone
- Build an adult support network: friends, family, a support group, your faith community
- Protect your sleep and basic physical needs — grief is physically depleting
- Create a transition ritual when children move between homes, for you as much as for them
- Give yourself permission to grieve the life you planned — that grief is real and it matters
- Find a divorce care group or ministry — community with others who understand is powerful

What to Do with Your Pain When Your Children Are Present

- Be honest: “This is hard for me too, and sometimes I feel sad. I’m going to be okay.”

- Do not lean on your child for emotional support — find an adult for that
- When you are overwhelmed, name it without burdening them: “I need a few minutes to breathe”
- Model coping — they are watching how adults handle pain. Show them it is possible.

 Get Counseling Individual therapy is not a luxury. It is how you process what your children cannot carry for you.	 Find Community DivorceCare groups, a supportive church, or trusted friends — isolation makes everything harder.	 Anchor in Faith Bring your full grief to God. The Psalms are full of lament, confusion, and hope in the same breath.
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Co-Parenting as Best You Can

Co-parenting after divorce is one of the hardest things two people who once hurt each other will ever be asked to do. It requires treating someone you may be furious at with enough civility that your children can flourish. This is not about reconciliation. It is about your children.

The Minimum Standard: Parallel Parenting

If true co-parenting is not possible due to high conflict, abuse, or safety concerns, aim for parallel parenting: each parent functions independently in their own home, communication is minimal and business-like, and children are not used as go-betweens. This is not ideal, but it protects children far better than ongoing warfare.

When Co-Parenting Is Possible, These Help Most

- Communicate about the children in writing to reduce real-time conflict
- Use a shared co-parenting app (OurFamilyWizard, TalkingParents) to document and organize
- Agree on the big three: bedtimes, homework expectations, and screen time
- Attend children’s events separately if needed — but both attend
- If your child has a counselor, both parents should know who it is and support the relationship
- Celebrate the other parent’s relationship with your child — even when it is painful to do so

	The research is clear: <i>Children do best when they have warm, consistent relationships with both parents. Your child’s love for their other parent is not a threat to you. It is a sign of health. Protecting that relationship is one of the most loving things you can do.</i>
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Warning Signs to Watch For in Your Children

Most children will show some signs of distress during a divorce. That is normal and expected. But some responses signal a need for professional support. Watch for:

Signs That Warrant a Counselor or Mental Health Evaluation

- Persistent sadness, withdrawal, or loss of interest in activities they used to love
- Significant changes in eating, sleeping, or school performance lasting more than a few weeks
- Statements about not wanting to be alive, hopelessness, or wishing they were dead
- Self-harm of any kind
- Dramatic behavioral changes: aggression, defiance, complete emotional shutdown
- Regression that persists — especially in older children (bedwetting, baby talk, extreme clinginess)
- Refusing to go to one parent's home (especially if fear, not preference, seems to be driving it)

If You or Your Child Is in Crisis

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — Call or Text 988

Crisis Text Line — Text HOME to 741741

National Domestic Violence Hotline — 1-800-799-7233



Faith in the Middle of It

Divorce raises hard questions about God, fairness, and the future. Children may be angry at God. You may be angry at God. That is allowed. The Psalms model exactly this — raw, honest, sometimes accusatory prayer that does not sanitize the pain.

Faith does not make divorce painless. But it offers something the world cannot: the assurance that your family is not beyond God's reach, that He sees your children, and that He is not finished writing this story.

Anchor Points for Faith Through Divorce

- Keep your children in church and faith community — stability and belonging matter more than ever
- Pray with your children honestly: “God, this is really hard. We don’t understand it. Help us.”
- Read Psalms together — Psalm 46, Psalm 34, Psalm 23 speak directly to loss and hope
- Help your children know that God is not punishing them — divorce is not God’s will, but God is present in it
- Seek out a pastor or faith counselor who can offer spiritual guidance alongside practical support
- Let your children see that your faith does not disappear under pressure — that it is real and honest

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

— Psalm 34:18



Resources for the Journey

You do not have to navigate this alone. These resources offer practical support, community, and tools for families moving through divorce.

Programs & Communities

- DivorceCare — Church-based divorce support groups nationwide. Also offers DivorceCare for Kids (DC4K). divorcecare.org
- Smart Stepfamilies — Resources for families navigating single parenting and eventual blending. smartstepfamilies.com
- Focus on the Family — Articles, counseling referrals, and a free consultation line (1-855-771-HELP). focusonthefamily.com

Co-Parenting Tools

- OurFamilyWizard — Communication and scheduling app designed for co-parents. ourfamilywizard.com
- TalkingParents — Secure, documented communication between co-parents. talkingparents.com

Key Books

- The Smart Stepfamily (Ron Deal) — For families navigating the next chapter after divorce
- Helping Children Cope with Divorce (Edward Teyber) — Research-based, practical, and compassionate
- Between Two Homes (Jo S. Klepfer) — A picture book for young children navigating two households
- Mom's House, Dad's House (Isolina Ricci) — A practical guide for co-parents

SDA-Specific Support

- NAD Family Ministries — Resources, training, and support for Adventist families in transition. nadfamily.org
- Adventist Mental Health Directory — Find a counselor who shares your faith values. sdamentalhealth.org

There Is a Path Through

Divorce is not the end of your family — it is a reorganization of it. Your children need you to survive this well. Not perfectly. Not without pain. But with honesty, with care for them above the conflict, and with faith that God can redeem even the most broken seasons. You are not alone. The people around you and the God above you are not finished with your family.