

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

Do's, don'ts, and resources to help ease the pain

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It is estimated that 40 percent of all first marriages end in divorce in the United States. Divorce is a stressful time for the adults involved, and the children's needs are often left unnoticed.

Various factors influence the differences between children raised in a single-parent household and in intact families. Some of those factors are:

The Loss of a Parent -- Just the logistics of parental separation will present adjustments for the children. The home, "where the heart is," and the house lived in, were all in one place before the separation of the child's parents. Now, where is home? There will be many questions and children will need their parent's help with these questions. In addition, there is a strong possibility that the child will lose the knowledge, skills, and resources once provided by the now missing parent.

Greater economic stress -- Children living in a single-parent environment will probably have fewer economic resources than children living in intact families.

Increased life stress -- Due to the many changes associated with divorce, such as changing schools, child care, different homes, poor parental adjustment, and conflict between parents.

Parents should be aware of these factors and acknowledge them.

Although many marriages end in divorce, there is a lot known about how to help children during this time. Some families seek counseling and many states require divorcing parents to attend parenting workshops and learn how to protect their children.

Parental Do's and Don'ts

- Do tell your children that they were not responsible for the divorce.
- Do take care of a child's emotional and physical needs. Children sense when things are not "right" and buried or untreated feelings over a length of time are stressful to all family members.
- Do develop a support system of family and friends.
- Do maintain open communication with your ex-spouse and actively support your child's relationship with your ex-spouse.
- Do jointly establish routines and discipline plans and stick to them!
- Do communicate regularly.

- Do pre-plan as much as possible with your ex-spouse and child.
- Do plan some "special" events on visitations
- Do remember to spend time just sharing and listening.
- Do be honest with your children about feelings. Honesty enables your child to feel secure in expressing feelings.
- Don't use children as "go-betweens."
- Don't involve your children in financial issues!
- Don't try to "buy" your children's affection.
- Don't make promises unless you can keep them! Parenting is not a competition. Be a parent first!

Finally, children, no matter what their ages, are always affected by family changes. It is very important that the parents acknowledge their children's feelings and encourage open communication. These are critical components of a more comfortable transition during this difficult family challenge.

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