

HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS THROUGH DIVORCE

For many people, their parents' divorce marks a turning point in their lives, whether the divorce happened many years ago or is taking place right now. About half the marriages in the United States today end in divorce, so plenty of kids and teens have to go through this. But when it happens to you, you can feel very alone and unsure of what it all means. It may seem hard, but it is possible to cope with divorce — and have a good family life in spite of some changes divorce may bring.

Why Are My Parents Divorcing?

Parents divorce for many reasons. Usually divorce happens when couples feel they can no longer live together due to fighting and anger, or because the love they had when they married has changed. Divorce also can be because one parent falls in love with someone else, and sometimes it's due to a serious problem like [drinking](#), abuse, or gambling. Sometimes nothing bad happens, but parents just decide to live apart.

Did you know it's really common for teens to think that their parents' divorce is somehow their fault? Just try to remember that parents' decisions to split up are to do with issues between them, and not because of something you might have done or not done. Some kids feel guilty about what happened, or wish they had prevented arguments by cooperating more within the family, doing better with their behavior, or getting better grades. But separation and divorce are a result of a couple's problems with each other, not with their kids. The decisions adults make about divorce are their own.

If your parents are divorcing, you may experience many feelings. Your emotions may change a lot, too. You may feel stressed out, angry, frustrated, or sad. You might feel protective of one parent or blame one for the situation. You may feel abandoned, afraid, worried, or guilty. You also may feel relieved, especially if there has been a lot of tension or fighting at home. These feelings are very typical and talking about them with a friend, family member, or trusted adult can really help.

How Will Divorce Change My Life?

Depending on what happens in your family, you might have to adjust to many changes. These could include things like [moving](#), changing schools, spending time with both parents separately, and perhaps dealing with parents' unpleasant feelings about one another.

Your parents may go to court to determine custody arrangements. You could end up living with one parent most of the time and visiting the other, or your parents may split their time with you evenly. At the beginning, it means you might have to be flexible and might have more hassles to deal with for a while.

Some teens have to travel between parents, and that can create challenges both socially and practically. Over time you can figure out a new routine that works for all of you. Often, it takes a while for custody arrangements to be finalized. This can give people time to adapt to these big changes and let families figure out what works best.

Money matters may change for your parents, too. A parent who didn't work during the marriage may need to find a job to pay for rent or a mortgage. This might be something a parent is excited about, but he or she may also feel nervous or pressured about finances. There are also expenses associated with divorce, from lawyers' fees to the cost of moving to a new place to live. Your family may not be able to afford all the things you were used to before the divorce. This is one of the difficult changes often associated with divorce. There can be good changes too — but how you cope with the stressful changes depends on your situation, your personality, and your support network.

What Parents and Teens Can Do to Make It Easier

Keep the peace. Dealing with divorce is easiest when parents get along. Teens find it especially hard when their parents fight and argue or act with bitterness toward each other. You can't do much to influence how your parents behave during a divorce, but you can ask them to do their best to call a truce to any bickering or unkind things they might be saying about each other. No matter what problems a couple may face, as parents they need to handle visiting arrangements peacefully to minimize the stress their kids may feel. Letting your parents know that even though you know everyone is super-stressed, you don't want to get caught in the middle.

Be fair. Most teens say it's important that parents don't try to get them to "take sides." You need to feel free to hang out with and talk to each of your parents without the other parent acting jealous, hurt, or mad. It's unfair for anyone to feel that talking to one parent is being disloyal to the other or that the burden of one parent's happiness is on your shoulders. When parents find it hard to let go of bitterness or anger, or if they are depressed about the changes brought on by divorce, they can find help from a counselor or therapist. This can help parents get past the pain divorce may have created, to find personal happiness, and to lift any burdens from their kids. Kids and teens also can benefit from seeing a family therapist or someone who specializes in helping them get through the stress of a family breakup. It might feel weird at first to talk to someone you don't know about personal feelings, but it can be really helpful to hear about how other teens in your situation have coped.

Keep in touch. Going back and forth between two homes can be tough, especially if parents live far apart. It can be a good idea to keep in touch with a parent you see less often because of distance. Even a quick email saying "I'm thinking of you" helps ease the feelings of missing each other. Making an effort to stay in touch when you're apart can keep both of you up to date on everyday activities and ideas.

Work it out. You may want both parents to come to special events, like games, meets, plays, or recitals. But sometimes a parent may find it awkward to attend if the other is present. It helps if parents can figure out a way to make this work, especially because you may need to feel the support and presence of both parents even more during divorce. You might be able to come up with a compromise or solution to this problem and present it to your parents.

Talk about the future. Many teens whose parents divorce worry that their own plans for the future could be affected. Some are concerned that the costs of divorce (like legal fees and expenses of two households) might mean there will be less money for college or other things. Pick a good time to tell your parents about your concerns — when there's enough time to sit down with one or both parents to discuss how the divorce will affect you. Don't worry about

putting added stress on your parents, just try to pick a good time to talk when everyone is feeling calm. It's better to bring your concerns into the open than to keep them to yourself and let worries or resentment build. There are solutions for most problems and advisors and counselors who can help teens and their parents find those solutions.

Figure out your strengths. How do you deal with stress? Do you get angry and take it out on siblings, friends, or yourself? Or are you someone who is more of a pleaser who puts others first? Do you tend to avoid conflict altogether and just hope that problems will magically disappear? A life-changing event like a divorce can put people through some tough times, but it can also help them learn about their strengths, and put in place some new coping skills. For example, how can you cope if one parent bad-mouths another? Sometimes staying quiet until the anger has subsided and then discussing it calmly with your mom or dad can help. You may want to tell them you have a right to love both your parents, no matter what they are doing to each other. If you need help figuring out your strengths or how to cope — like from a favorite aunt or from your school counselor — ask for it! And if you find it hard to confront your parents, try writing them a letter. Figure out what works for you.

Live your life. Sometimes during a divorce, parents may be so caught up in their own changes it can feel like your own life is on hold. In addition to staying focused on your own plans and dreams, make sure you participate in as many of your normal activities as possible. When things are changing at home, it can really help to keep some things, such as school activities and friends, the same. If things get too hard at home, see if you can stay with a friend or relative until things calm down. Take care of yourself by eating right and getting regular exercise — two great stress busters! Figure out what's important to you — spending time with friends, working hard at school, writing or drawing, or being great at basketball. Finding your inner strength and focusing on your own goals can really help your stress levels.

Let others support you. Talk about your feelings and reactions to the divorce with someone you trust. If you're feeling down or upset, let your friends and family members support you. These feelings usually pass. If they don't, and if you're feeling depressed or stressed out, or if it's hard to concentrate on your normal activities, let a counselor or therapist help you. Your parents, school counselor, or a doctor or other health professional can help you find one. Many communities and schools have support groups for kids and teens whose parents have divorced. It can really help to talk to other kids your age going through similar experiences.

Bringing Out the Positive

There will be ups and downs in the process, but teens can cope successfully with their parents' divorce and the changes it brings. You might even discover some unexpected positives. Many teens find their parents are actually happier after the divorce or they may develop new and better ways of relating to both parents when they have separate time with each one. Some teens learn compassion and caring skills when a younger brother or sister needs their support and care. Siblings who are closer in age may form tighter bonds, learning to count on each other more because they're facing the challenges of their parents' divorce together. Coping well with divorce also can bring out strength and maturity. Some become more responsible, better problem solvers, better listeners, or better friends. Looking back on the experience, lots of people say that they learned coping skills they never knew they had and feel stronger and more resilient as a result of what they went through.

Many movies have been made about divorce and [stepfamilies](#) — some with happy endings, some not. That's how it is in real life too. But most teens who go through a divorce learn (sometimes to their surprise) that they can make it through this difficult situation successfully. Giving it time, letting others support you along the way, and keeping an eye on the good things in your life can make all the difference.