

# **Help Toddlers and Preschoolers with Divorce**

## ***Look for Changes in Behavior with Young Children***

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Young children cope with divorce differently than older children. Toddlers and preschoolers tell their story through changes in behavior.

Toddlers and preschoolers don't always understand the world around them. Young kids also don't know how to express themselves. This means that mothers and fathers need to watch for changes in behavior, which is a cue for parents to spend more time with their child. Parents can help young children cope with divorce by play acting through toys and using creative stories to help guide their child through times of change.

### ***Changes in Behavior***

All young children react differently to change, but toddlers and preschoolers tell their story through changes in behavior. Divorce is hard for everyone. Little kids may show signs of stress by an increase in:

- Tantrums
- Sleep problems
- Acting out: hitting, kicking, throwing things
- Withdrawal
- Clinging and separation anxiety
- Bed wetting, forgetting toilet training, thumb sucking

### ***Helping Children Cope with Divorce: Young Children Need Reassurance***

Because young children have a hard time separating fact from fantasy, many little kids feel as though they may have somehow caused their parents' divorce. (Often, children never say anything, but believe they have done something wrong.) Moms and dads need to reassure their children and let youngsters know that no child ever causes a split in a family.

Parents are encouraged to be open and honest with children, but their language should be adjusted to the child's level of understanding. Here are examples of what to say to toddlers and preschoolers:

- "Mommy and Daddy could not find a way to work out our problems or to make things better. We've made mistakes and we're sorry that we're making you sad (angry)."
- "Divorce is a grown-up problem and you are not to blame."

- “We won’t be living together anymore, but we both love you no matter where either of us lives.”
- “It’s OK to tell me what you feel or think.”

Little kids need to hear things over and over, so parents should be prepared to explain the details of the separation and divorce for quite some time. It is perfectly normal for a child to have difficulty with a change of this magnitude. Parents should continue to reassure the child that it is not his or her fault.

### ***Playtime is Work for Toddlers and Preschoolers***

Play is one of the best ways to help young children cope with divorce and their feelings about it. Sometimes little kids are afraid or unable to talk about their anxieties. Here are some ideas that other parents have used:

- Read the child an age appropriate book about divorce. Watch for signs that the youngster wants to talk.
- Act out a story with toys or dolls. Small toys can play out a child-sized version of daddy doll moving away and baby doll visiting daddy. Encourage the youngster to play the part of any of the characters.
- Ask questions like, “Do you think that Little Teddy Bear is sad when he can’t kiss mommy and daddy goodnight at the same time?”
- Use drawings to communicate.
- Tell a story about an imaginary child with the same fears and feelings as the real child.

Single parents should remember that they are not alone. Doctors, teachers, and psychologists have helped numerous parents and children through divorces. Even though adults don’t want to dwell on divorce, they can help their children adapt by explaining the situation in childlike terms.

Remember that unusual changes in a child’s behavior may mean that the youngster is having difficulty understanding the divorce. Use words, pictures, books, toys or anything else to help the child understand that he or she is still loved no matter what happens.