

# Family Times

## NEWSLETTER



NEWSLETTER FOR ADULTS WITH CHILDREN AGES 5-8

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### Helping Children Deal with Divorce or Separation

All of us have experienced separation at some point in our lives. Children also experience separation and loss when the family unit breaks up. While divorce is a very difficult process for parents, it can be truly traumatic for their children. Children are probably the ones most affected by a divorce. It is very important to make the adjustment period as easy as possible for them.

Because support and love for our children come mostly from the family, a breakup in the family unit proves to be distressing for children.

Many children cannot understand why their parents are separating.

If we are to help children deal with the breakup of the family, it is important that we look at the world through a child's eyes.

Much of what a child sees, says, and understands is based upon developmental age. Independence is very important for early school-age children. Friends are also important to this age group. However, parents still are the core of the child's existence and the center of his or her universe. Therefore, parents' actions are very important during this time.

Children look to you to try to understand and make sense of this change in their lives. It is important to recognize that it is normal for children to exhibit abnormal behavior after a family breakup. Children who experience divorce may also exhibit more extremes in their behavior.

- Children may experience an initial period of protest and then become quiet or withdrawn.
- Some children may revert to younger childlike behavior.
- Children often fear for their own safety. Parents may find that bedtime is extremely stressful because children fear that other family members may leave during the night.

- Children may feel deprived and, as a result, may ask for new possessions or cling to a parent.

It is equally important for parents to use certain strategies to help ease the transition for children. Sometimes, parents become blind to their children's needs. Children are often caught in the middle. While parents are divorced from each other, they are not divorced from their children. Unless one spouse totally gives up the responsibility of being a parent, both parents will continue to play an important role in their children's lives.

### How Parents Can Help

- Parents need to be honest. It is easier than parents may think for children to handle the truth.
- Parents need to offer lots of love, help, and reassurance to the child. Children want to know that you will be there for them through this separation process.
- Parents need to explain exactly what is going to happen, the sooner the better.
- Parents need to reassure children that they are not the reason for the breakup of the family unit.

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- Parents need to help their children express their emotions. Let them know that it is okay to feel sad. Show them through your own behavior how to use coping skills to feel better.
- Keep children involved in positive activities. Music, crafts, and sports are healthy focuses for young, school-age children.

## Activities for Children Experiencing Divorce

Children going through divorce experience a variety of emotions. Sometimes, the child has difficulty expressing these frustrations and emotions verbally. Drawing pictures is one way that children can express their true feelings. These pictures can also help parents understand exactly what their child is feeling about the separation. The parent will want to ask the child specific questions about the picture and why he or she has drawn these things.

### Ideas for drawings

- What does divorce feel like?
- Draw a picture of your family.
- If you could have one wish, what would it be? Draw your wish.
- If you could draw divorce, what would it look like?

Writing stories also helps a child express frustrations and emotions. Ask the child to write a story about divorce. Ask the child to draw pictures in the book to illustrate the story. Be supportive of your child's story and ask questions.

Making puppets can also help a child express feelings. The puppets can be simple ones made out of brown paper bags. Ask the child to be creative with the puppets. Have the puppets talk about divorce and what they are feeling.



### The Book Nook

A good book about divorce for young children is

*The Spider and the Bee*  
by Michele Shen

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## To Make a Difference

- Try to share the parenting role.
- Try to develop a parenting plan that will ensure that the children will be able to spend sufficient time with both parents. Children need to benefit from parental love, affection, influence, and support.
- Ensure that children's lives are disrupted as little as possible by parents' decisions. Life should go on as before as much as possible.
- Use respect when talking with the children about the other parent.
- Reinforce rules established by both parents and give positive feedback that will help children develop self-rewards, limits, and personal goals.

