FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

Helping Your Child Through Separation & Divorce

Simple, child-centered ways to provide reassurance, reduce conflict, and help your child adjust to changes within the family.

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When a family changes shape, children look to the adults around them for signs that things will be okay. You don't have to handle this perfectly. What helps most is steady, repeated reassurance that they are loved, that they will be cared for, and that the grown-ups are handling the grown-up parts.

The ideas below are simple on purpose. Choose one or two to start with, and come back to the rest as your family settles into its new rhythm.

Seven Ways to Help

- Keep adult conflict away from children
- Avoid asking children to choose sides
- Maintain predictable routines when possible
- Give age-appropriate information
- Allow children to love both parents without guilt
- Watch for behavioral and emotional changes
- Remind them that adult decisions are not their responsibility

01. Keep adult conflict away from children

Children can adjust well to life in two homes. What weighs on them most is being caught in ongoing conflict between the people they love.

- **Choose the time and place.** Save difficult conversations for when your child is not in the room or within earshot. That includes phone calls, and texts they might read over your shoulder.
- **Keep exchanges short and courteous.** A businesslike tone, the kind you might use with a coworker, is enough.
- **Pause when things heat up.** It is always okay to say, "Let's finish this later," and come back to it by email or with the help of a mediator or therapist.

IF YOUR CHILD OVERHEARS AN ARGUMENT:

"I'm sorry you heard that. It was a grown-up disagreement, and it is not yours to worry about or fix."

02. Avoid asking children to choose sides

Even small requests can leave a child feeling torn between two people they love. That is a heavy thing for a child to carry.

- **Let adults carry adult messages.** Share schedules, money matters, and concerns directly with your co-parent, not through your child.
- **Skip the comparison questions.** Asking who they would rather be with, or which home is more fun, puts them in an impossible spot.
- **Find your own support.** Your feelings about your co-parent are real and deserve a place to go. A friend, family member, or therapist can hold them so your child doesn't have to.

WORDS YOU CAN USE:

"You never have to pick between us. You get to love us both."

03. Maintain predictable routines when possible

When big things are changing, the small things that stay the same help a child feel safe.

- **Protect the anchors.** Wake-up, meals, school, activities, and bedtime are the parts of the day children rely on most.
- **Make the schedule visible.** A simple calendar showing where they will be each day answers questions before they turn into worries.
- **Give notice when plans change.** Flexibility is part of life. A heads-up makes it easier to handle.
- **Aim for similar, not identical.** Two homes will never match exactly. Agreeing on a few basics, like bedtime and screen time, goes a long way.

04. Give age-appropriate information

Children need the truth in a size they can carry: what is changing, what is staying the same, and that they will be taken care of.

- **Young children** need short, concrete answers about their own day: where they will sleep, who will pick them up, and when they will see each parent.
- **School-age children** need a clear, honest explanation without blame. Expect the same questions to come back more than once.
- **Teens** can handle more detail and deserve a voice in their schedule. They still don't need the adult details of finances, legal matters, or what went wrong in the relationship.
- **It is okay not to have every answer.** "I don't know yet, and I will tell you as soon as I do" is both honest and reassuring.

WORDS YOU CAN USE:

"We have decided to live in two homes. You will have a home with each of us. We both love you, and that will never change."

05. Allow children to love both parents without guilt

Children do best when they feel free to enjoy their relationship with each parent. They watch your face and listen to your tone for permission.

- **Welcome their stories.** When your child shares something about time at their other home, respond with interest and warmth.
- **Make room for connection.** Photos, phone calls, and belongings that move between homes all tell your child that both relationships are welcome.
- **Speak respectfully about their other parent.** Children often hear criticism of a parent as criticism of a part of themselves.

WORDS YOU CAN USE:

"I'm so glad you had a good time. Tell me about it."

Small note: If you have concerns about your child's safety with another adult, that is a different situation. Speak with your attorney, your child's therapist, or the professionals involved with your family.

06. Watch for behavioral and emotional changes

Children often show their feelings before they can explain them. Some changes are a normal part of adjusting, and most ease as life becomes more predictable.

- **Know the common signs.** Clinginess, trouble sleeping, irritability, stomachaches, changes at school, or a return to younger behaviors are all ways stress can show up.
- **Keep other adults in the loop.** A teacher, coach, or caregiver who knows about the change at home can offer extra patience and tell you what they notice.
- **Notice what lasts.** Changes that continue for several weeks, grow stronger, or get in the way of daily life are worth a closer look.

FOR MORE ON WHAT TO LOOK FOR—

Read *When Your Child Is Having a Hard Time.*

07. Remind them that adult decisions are not their responsibility

Many children quietly believe they caused the separation, or that they could fix it if they behaved differently. They rarely say so out loud.

- **Say it plainly, and more than once.** Children often need to hear it many times, at different ages, before they believe it.
- **Keep them out of the caretaker role.** It is okay for your child to see that you are sad. Let them also see that you have other adults to lean on.
- **Let them be kids.** Friends, play, school, and activities are their job right now.

WORDS YOU CAN USE:

"This was a grown-up decision. Nothing you did caused it, and it is not your job to fix it."

A Note for You

No parent gets through a separation without hard moments. What matters most is repair: coming back after a difficult day, owning your part, and reconnecting with your child.

Caring for yourself is part of caring for your child. If your family could use more support, or if conflict with a co-parent is making these ideas hard to put into practice, working with a therapist can help.

