

HELPFUL HINTS FROM A CHILD CARE PROVIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Sharing the Care

Whether your split is amicable or acrimonious, child care providers have a few suggestions to make some of the routine aspects of child-rearing more manageable for everyone involved.

If you share custody of your child, care providers must have **emergency contact information for both parents**. They also need to know who will be picking up each day. If it doesn't matter, inform them. Sometimes parents take an unexpected day off and want to visit with their child for the afternoon. You can imagine the teacher's discomfort at having to referee those kinds of arrangements. If it's not on paper, they cannot enforce it.

If you have **sole custody** and do not want your child's non-custodial parent to have any contact, child care providers need this in writing, as well as a copy of the custody agreement. This information should include what steps you expect them to take if your ex-spouse shows up at the child's place of care.

Tuition is another consideration for divorced parents. If you will share the cost of care, your child's provider will need both parents to sign the contract and put the payment arrangement in writing. If your spouse is not fulfilling his or her obligations, please speak with the director as soon as possible to avoid becoming delinquent.

Teachers **communicate** with parents in a variety of ways. Please let the child care provider know if both parents should receive copies of any written materials that are sent home- newsletters, notes, etc. If you would prefer to do separate parent-teacher conferences, usually your child's care provider can accommodate that.

If both parents will be dropping off on different days, you should figure out a way that everyone knows what to bring to the center each day. It's especially important to keep children's cubbies stocked, check bags for notes, and check the calendar for special events. Young children can't be expected to remember what they need to bring every day.

If you aren't yet divorced but are having a trial **separation**, please let the child care provider know how they can support your family during this period. Sometimes separated parents want to spend more time alone with their child and will change their child care schedule. A regular schedule with shorter days is a great option. Child care providers recommend you keep things consistent. Children are very dependent on routines to feel secure, so they need to know where they'll be from day to day.

Establishing Two Households

Here are a few ways for your child to feel powerful during a divorce.

- Give him/her their own space in each household. Let him/her help decorate and choose the furnishings.
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- Use a calendar to help your child keep track of where he/she will be, when.
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- Don't quiz your child about what he/she does at his/her other parent's house.
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- Keep disapproval about your ex-spouse's parenting choices to yourself. Discuss any concerns out of your child's earshot.
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- Expect your child to show some stress, especially before and after visits. He/she may regress or withdraw.
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- Confer with your ex-spouse to try and keep routines and behavioral expectations consistent between the two households. This is one of the best ways you can provide stability for your child.

Ages and Stages: What does divorce feel like?

Divorce signifies a loss for most young children. A loss of parent, the loss of a family unit, or the loss of the idea of a family (even if the reality wasn't so rosy). As such, most children grieve this loss in pretty typical ways.

Infants and toddlers tend to miss the physical comfort of the spouse who moves out, and their daily routines with that person. They may become clingy or fussy at tough times of day- when they're tired or hungry, for example. Establishing a new routine and some new comfort ritual helps them feel secure with the new arrangement. The "away" spouse might leave a T-shirt or blanket with his or her scent on it with the child.

Preschoolers and younger school age children are still very egocentric, and may assume they had some effect on the divorce. Parents can be careful to use words and concepts that make it clear that it is the adults who could not live together and no amount of good or bad behavior on the part of the child can affect that outcome. Preschoolers may also identify with the "displaced" (in their eyes) spouse and wonder if they too, can be divorced. Emphasizing unconditional love and distinguishing bad behavior from "bad kids" can help them feel more secure. "I feel frustrated when you don't listen to me, but I still love you."

Older children may act out their parents' disharmony with sibling, testing limits to see if that bond too, can be severed. They may feel compelled to take sides and determine one parent as the "bad guy". They may need someone to blame, and gather evidence of perceived wrongs in their attempt to do so.

With children of all ages, two factors determine how well they'll cope with a divorce: **how well the parents deal with each other during the process**, and **the child's involvement with each parent**. If you feel that you and your child is failing on either of these fronts, professional counseling can help meet both of your needs. Denying your own needs to serve your child's will shortchange everyone.

Regression

During emotional stress, children may regress to younger behaviors: a potty-trained toddler may have accidents, a preschooler may start thumb-sucking again, or you may note a general increase in whining and frustration.

A little TLC is the best remedy. This doesn't mean lowering your standards for your child's capabilities, but there is no need to overreact to what are most likely temporary setbacks. Bring out comfort items for a temporary fix. Perhaps you had been leaving his/her favorite blanket at home during the day. Why not let it come in the car or even to the center for a short while?

It can be tempting to use bribes to help your child move past any regressive behaviors. But it's a short-term fix that can have long-term effects. By "bribing" children to act happy or "mature", we can imply that their unhappy or angry feelings aren't acceptable. They may stop sharing with you or others they looked up to, which can lead to other displaced emotional acting out.

Kids need permission to express their emotions – sadness, anger, relief, whatever - in order to resolve them. Instead of using material rewards to induce desired behavior, try focusing on feelings, "You seem angry. But throwing toys hurts people. Let's think of a better way for you to show me you're angry."

Frequently Asked Questions

My ex-spouse badmouths me to my child's teachers. I have tried to be mature about this situation, but I really want to defend myself. What should I do?

You have an existing relationship with your child's teachers that you need to maintain, and keeping them out of the *he said/she said* games is a good way to show respect for that relationship. If you feel compelled to clarify some gossip, please speak with your center director who can de-personalize the situation and relay any necessary information to the teachers.

I am overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being a single parent. I feel so ashamed when I forget my child's lunch, for example. What can I do?

Married parents forget to send things to school some days, too. And even if your parenting isn't up to your usual gold standard, teachers understand that dynamic and can be a support. Your child isn't likely to make a big deal about a pair of boots if you don't. Cut yourself some slack — it's most important that you are emotionally available to your child right now, not beating yourself up over minor incidents.

My ex-spouse is much better off financially than I am. I hate that I can't give our child all the things that he/she can. What advice can you give me?

These things don't matter. **Really!** Children want time and attention. Toys and vacations are like dessert — yummy, but you can't live on them. Think of your together time as the protein and carbohydrates your child needs to get through the day and build a strong sense of self.