

# How to Help Your Child Cope with Divorce

By Andrea Williams



broken family on a blackboard

(<http://www.giantmedia.com/privacy/>).

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## Top Questions Kids Ask About Money (And How To Answer)

Engaging with your children about how money works and your family's relationship to it can shape their perspective on spending and saving.

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2015 was officially the summer of splits. Among the casualties: fellow thespians Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner, reality TV staples Kourtney Kardashian and Scott Disick and rock-star spouses Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale. But while tabloids had a field day reporting the latest scandal and the general public was left sorting the fact from fiction, there was a much bigger issue at play. When each of the aforementioned relationships crumbled, there were small children left standing in the wake.

In an era of uber-rich celebrities, in which the chasm between the haves and have-nots seems like it can't get any bigger, divorce and separation—followed by not-so-successful attempts at co-parenting—is perhaps the last proof that the rich and famous are really no different than the rest of us. Indeed, those extra millions typically can't cushion a couple from the ravages of Splitsville any more than the efforts of millions of middle Americans.

Unfortunately, some relationships just don't work. The key is to make the break as clean as possible and keep things amicable enough so that any children involved aren't damaged further. And on a positive note, that may actually prove easier far away from public scrutiny—as long as you know what you're doing, that is. Here, we've compiled the best expert tips on how to help kids handle divorce or separation.

**Talk about the split, but keep it age-appropriate**

Kids are incredibly smart and intuitive little beings. As a parent, you already know this. You should also know, then, that trying to gloss over your split—or avoid addressing it at all—will only result in more problems (read: emotional distress, insecurities, trust issues, etc.) down the road. You definitely need to talk to your kids, but there's a right way and a wrong way to do it.

“Do not assume it's a one-and-done conversation, but invite your children to ask questions as they come up,” says Carrie Krawiec, the executive director of the Michigan Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (<http://www.michiganfamilytherapy.org/ohana/website/index.cfm?p=95575656314>) and a licensed marriage and family therapist at the Birmingham Maple Clinic in Troy, Michigan. “But just because they ask a question doesn't mean you have to answer—or answer immediately. Buy yourself time to plan a meaningful answer by saying, ‘That's such a good question, I'd like to think about a response; Tell me more about how that question came in your mind.’”

It's important to let kids know that the breakup wasn't their fault and had nothing to do with them, but taking time to prepare a full, appropriate response is a critical step to avoid shifting your hurt, pain or other emotions onto your child. "Let your child know you are okay, and though you may be sad, you have your own coping tools or someone else to talk to so your child doesn't have to worry about you," Krawiec adds. "Tailor the information you give to each child by age, maturity level and previous ability to handle difficult conversations, and normalize that they may still have good feelings about the other parent. If possible, help them to foster a relationship with that person even if it doesn't include you."

### **Stick to a routine, but allow some child involvement**

There's no way around it—divorcing parents are bound to cause significant changes in a child's home life, and these vary changes can significantly impact the child's emotional wellbeing. Particularly for younger children and those who felt blindsided by the split, maintaining consistency in all other areas of the child's life can provide a sense of control amid the chaos. "Stabilize your toddler as quickly as possible by sticking to routine and being consistent with your discipline," advises [Dr. Gail Gross](http://drgailgross.com) (<http://drgailgross.com>), a family and child development expert. "Keep a structured schedule for your home routine and for parental visits. This will give your toddler a routine that he can count on. That, alone, can help re-establish security."

Meanwhile, as children age and are able to better process the shifting family dynamic, allowing some involvement in creating new routines can be equally beneficial. "Allow your children [aged 6-12] to have a voice in the day-to-day decisions," Gross adds. "This can include helping to decide on the new sleeping arrangements; home décor such as sheets, blankets, pillows and bedspreads; and where to go on Spring Break. This also means allowing your children to have a voice in creating new family traditions. When parents divorce, children often feel out of control because they didn't have a say or any options in the decision to divorce. These small experiences of choice help your children feel invested in their new family."

### **Co-parent like a boss**

After enduring a failing relationship for months or years, establishing a peaceful and productive relationship with an ex-spouse can easily be the most difficult part of the entire ordeal. But for the emotional sake of the children, it's absolutely necessary.

First, says psychotherapist Emily Roberts, parent shouldn't have any conversations about the split while the children are at home. "I can't keep track of how many stories I've heard from kids and adults who have been haunted by listening from the top of the stairs, reading parents emails or, worse, seeing one

parent drive away,” she says. “They feel helpless and hurt, too. When parents don’t do this amicably, depression, self-harming and substance abuse skyrockets in the teenage years.”

Also, says relationship expert and author [April Masini \(http://www.askapril.com\)](http://www.askapril.com), it’s critical that parents avoid speaking negatively about the other parent to the children. “Even if your soon-to-be ex did you wrong in every way possible, he or she is still their parent, and when you speak ill of the parent, you speak ill of the child,” she explains. “Try to stay even-tempered in your explanations. Save the venting for your friends. Your kids need to not hate the other parent, even if you do.”

Avoiding the ex-bashing will also help children understand that there is a mutual respect for the other parent as an authoritative figure. This will give kids the freedom to express their own feelings of love and respect while also preventing them from trying to pit one parent against the other. Then, and only then, will it be possible to forge a new family normal that the kids—and both parents—can be happy with.

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