

Dealing with Your Parents' Divorce

A Guide of What to Expect and How to Cope

A note from the author:

I found out my parents were getting divorced my last day of my sophomore year of high school when I came home and found a message from my mom's lawyer waiting on the answering machine. I was hurt, sad, angry, and more than a little afraid, all at once. I didn't know what divorce would mean for my family, or what to expect, and that was a scary feeling. Chances are, you're feeling something similar, which is why I made this guide to help kids like you and me dealing with the same situation. Here you'll find an explanation of divorce, answers to common concerns, and advice from someone who's been in your shoes – everything I wish I'd known when my parents divorced. For more resources, check out the complete website: divorceandteens.weebly.com.

General Advice

1. Life goes on

If you think that nothing will ever be the same after your parents' divorce, you're right. However, just because things have changed doesn't mean that you can't go on to live a great life. It may be in a different house and with a different routine, but there is still life after divorce. School keeps going, life keeps going, and most importantly, you keep going. Still doubtful? Ask around at your school and I guarantee you that you'll find other kids whose parents are divorced. They've made it through and you will, too. Children of divorce can and do go on to live successful lives, even becoming president of the United States. It may not be easy, but you've got to keep going. This is not the end of the road.

2. This is not your fault.

Unfortunately, the first thought that flashes through most kids' heads when they hear that their parents are getting a divorce is typically "it's my fault." I'm guilty of that, too, but it's not true for either of us. The real people responsible for this are your parents. They're adults, and they understand the decision that they're making. And, for whatever reason, they have decided that a divorce is the best option for your family. As much as it's nice to think that we could have stopped this, the truth is that their decision was out of our hands. You are not responsible for the failure of their marriage.

3. Your parents may act differently for a while.

Unfortunately, that's to be expected. Like you, your parents are adjusting to this change in their own ways. They may start dating other people and spend less time at home or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, suddenly start cooking dinner every night and trying to spend more time with you.

Disclaimer: The advice given here may not be completely accurate, and may not apply to everyone. I am not a professional, simply someone with divorced parents. If you need psychological or legal advice, seek help elsewhere. If you are in a crisis, call 911 or a local emergency number.

And, yes, they will probably be sad and angry for a while. This has nothing to do with you; it's just their way of grieving. Remember, they didn't get married expecting to get divorced and it was probably very hard on them to see their marriage fail. Things should stabilize again after your parents have finished adjusting.

4. You can't fix everything.

This is really hard for most people to admit, myself included, but like I said before, some things are just out of our hands. So, while you might give your mom or dad an extra hug when they're feeling down or spend a little more time with your brother or sister, remember that you can't always fix things for them. The first person you should take care of is yourself. Try to remember that if you find yourself acting more like your parents' psychologist than their child, or your brother or sister's parent rather than their sibling. You don't need to act like someone else to be a great child, brother, or sister - just be yourself. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try to help out, but you need to take care of yourself, too.

5. Everyone's experience is different.

Divorce affects every person differently, depending on their personality and family life. While one person may want things to go back to the way they used to be, another may be relieved that their parents have divorced. Some teens may have even been completely taken by surprise by their parents' divorce. Personally, I had thought my family was perfect before it all came crashing down, but now I'm grateful that my parents are divorced – I see it as a path to healing. No matter what you feel, it's okay to feel that way! Just remember that no two experiences are alike. Stepfamilies, moving, visitation - it all varies for each person. So even though you've heard what the experience was like for others, it doesn't mean it will be the same for you. Divorce is different for everyone.

6. Divorce doesn't happen like in the movies.

Ever seen the movie *The Parent Trap*? Two girls, whose parents are divorced, trick their parents into getting back together and they all become one big happy family again. Unfortunately, it rarely happens like this in real life. For most parents, divorce is final. No amount of playing matchmaker on your part will get them back together. This is their decision, and, as hard as it is to admit, you have no control over it. The good side? Stepfamilies don't work like they show in the movies, either. Remember the evil stepmother in *Cinderella*? In reality, no normal stepmother will make you sleep by the fire in rags. And, believe it or not, there are actually many good stepmothers (and stepfathers) in real life.

How Does Divorce Work?

Divorce can be pretty complicated, so here we're going to break it down into just the basics you need to know – 1) the vocabulary, 2) the divorce process, and 3) custody.

1. Vocabulary

These terms are going to start being used a lot in your family, and if you want to be part of the conversation and make your wishes known it's important that you understand what's going on. The terms include: divorce, custody, visitation, child support, and alimony. Know what all of these are already? Feel free to move on! But if you don't, or you're not sure, keep reading. I'll give you the more official definition, and then I'll translate it into easier to understand terms.

Custody

Official: "Immediate charge and control, as over a ward, exercised by a person."

What you need to know:

The parent who has sole or primary custody over you is the parent who is essentially in charge of taking care of you and making decisions that involve you. Just because one parent has primary custody of you doesn't mean that you won't see the other parent, though - it just means there's one parent legally in charge of you. You'll probably live with that parent most of the time. When both parents share custody of you, it's called joint custody. There are two types of joint custody: joint legal custody and joint physical custody. Joint legal custody is really easy to get confused with sole custody, because you still live with one main parent. The only difference is that both parents have the power to help make decisions involving you. With joint physical custody, not only do both parents make decisions, but you'll also take turns living with them.

Visitation

Official: "Temporary custody of a child granted to a noncustodial parent."

What you need to know:

In plain terms, visitation is just what it sounds like - when you go visit the other parent. Sometimes these visits are supervised, depending on what the judge decides. Visitation is awarded to the noncustodial parent by a court and typically has you go visit the other parent some weekends and on certain holidays, although this varies. If you have questions, ask your parent. For me, I was used to celebrating most holiday traditions with my mom, so even though my dad had visitation rights then I asked him if I could spend Christmas Eve with him rather than Christmas Day. In my case, he and my mom were fine with it, but you can't know until you ask.

Child support

Official: "Court-ordered support paid by one spouse to the other who has custody of the children after the parents are separated."

What you need to know:

This is basically when one of your parents, typically the parent who doesn't have custody of you, gives the other parent money to help them take care of you.

Alimony

Official: "Allowance to one spouse by another for support pending/after legal separation or divorce."

What you need to know:

Typically in a family one parent makes more money than another. When they divorce, the parent that makes the most money often gives the other parent money to help them support themselves. That money is called alimony.

2. The Divorce Process

You don't need to know all the details, but understanding the basics of how divorce works can make it a lot less frightening, which is why we'll run over the basic steps of getting a divorce in this brief one-page explanation.

Step 1: Separation

This step isn't always legally required, but generally one parent moves out of the house before the official divorce happens.

Step 2: Paperwork

The parent requesting the divorce fills out the paperwork. In a separate process, they will also fill out a custody petition, asking for sole or joint custody of you.

Step 3: Officially tell the other parent

The parent who filed (asked) for divorce "serves" the other parent with the papers. It simply means that they notify your other parent that they're applying for a divorce.

Step 4: The other parent answers

At this point, the parent who has been served with the divorce can choose to go through an uncontested divorce (the parents mostly agree on the situation), or a contested divorce.

Step 5: The temporary hearing

Officially divorcing can take a while, so at this hearing your parents figure out who's allowed to do what while they're waiting for the actual trial. This involves temporary child custody, temporary child support, etc.

Step 6: Settlement

After essentially having each attorney investigate the other parent (the discovery stage) the parents try and agree on a settlement. If they manage to agree on everything at this point, they don't have to go to court. If not, though, they move on to Step 7.

Step 7: Trial

Your parents and their attorneys take the situation to a judge. Each attorney will try and help their client (your parent) to "win," if there is such a thing. The judge then makes a decision on things like what parent gets custody over you (although your opinion will likely be taken into account - read more in the Custody section), how much child support will have to be paid, etc.

Step 8: Resolution

This is the point where you hopefully move on with your lives. Unless one of your parents decides to appeal, the divorce is done and settled.

3. How Custody Works

What Factors Do Judges Use to Decide Your Custody?

Here's an example I found (from Michigan) of some of the factors judges may consider in the best interests of the children when they award custody, adapted from the Child Custody Act of 1970 and rephrased to make it easier to understand. For me these questions are proof that judges really do try to do what's best of you. You will not end up with a bad parent.

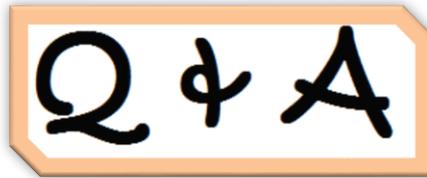
1. Do you and your parent love each other?
2. Which parent can best educate you?
3. Can/will your parent take care of your basic needs?
4. Which parent have you lived with longest and most successfully?
5. Is your current or future home going to be permanent?
6. Does the parent have a criminal history?
7. Are both parents healthy in both mind and body?
8. How have you yourself been doing?
9. What are your (the child's) preferences?
10. Will your parent encourage you to stay in touch with your other parent?
11. Was there domestic violence at home?

Why Can't I Decide For Myself?

If you're judged to be mature enough, sometimes the judge will let you participate in the decision as to which parent gets custody of you. "Why can't I just choose which parent I live with?" you may be wondering. That's a good question - it is your family, so why isn't it legally your decision? For the answer I consulted a book that I've mentioned on my website, Divorce: Young People Caught in the Middle, by Beth Levine. And the answer is that if you're judged mature enough, generally age 13 and older, your wishes are given serious consideration. However, you're not allowed to actually choose for yourself because your decision would be affected by a whole host of outside factors. Your decision could be influenced by...

1. Fear of your parents' anger if you don't choose to live with them.
2. Guilt about abandoning one of your parents, or feeling that one of your parents needs you around to help them.
3. Anger at one of your parents.
4. Fear of abandonment, which could drive you to choose the parent you worry might leave if you don't live with them.
5. Your parents themselves, through threats or bribery.

So ultimately the judge, who wouldn't be influenced by any of those five concerns, chooses who you'll live with. This does take the decision out of your hands, but it is done with your interests at heart, as frustrating as that may sound.



If your parents are divorcing, you probably have a lot of questions about what will happen. These are some common questions that other kids with divorced parents, including myself, wish they'd known the answers to when their parents divorced. I tried to give you a general feel for what life will be like after divorce, because one of the most frightening things about a divorce is not knowing what's going to happen next.

Q Does the divorce mean that I'll have to move?

A Not necessarily, but it's definitely a possibility. Some kids stay in the same house, but others move anywhere from a new house in the same neighborhood to a few states away. I ended up moving a just a few miles away, but it just depends on your situation. Ask your parents about their plans to know for sure.

Q How long does it take to get used to a divorced family?

A This is a complicated question. You may never get used to your parents being divorced, but things do get better. It's a lot to adjust to, living with just one parent at a time, possibly moving, and watching your parents eventually start dating again. This is just something you'll deal with at your own pace. After about six months, though, you'll probably be used to your new routine which definitely helps, and I personally noticed that after a year, things started falling into place. Coping with divorce is a process, but you can get through it. There is life after divorce; you just have to hang in there, because things really do get better.

Q My parents want shared/joint custody of me. What should I expect?

A It depends on the circumstances. Joint or shared custody just means that you live with both parents, but at different times. So you may spend one week at your mom's, the next week at your dad's, the next week at your mom's, and so on. There are both pros and cons to this. Being able to live with both parents is actually a great opportunity, which is the pro. The con, however, is you're probably going to have to get used to packing your bags since you'll be moving between houses so much. Like anything, though, packing will get easier over time and as you get used to it and form a routine things should start falling into place.

Q I just want to fix it all and make things go back to the way they were. What can I do?

A The answer is really hard because I felt the same way when my parents first divorced. The biggest thing you can do here is admit that there's nothing you can do. I know I keep saying that, but I don't think I can emphasize it enough because the hardest thing to do is nothing at all. You are not responsible for fixing your family; the only person you can control is yourself.

Q I think my parent is depressed. What should I do?

A Unfortunately, divorce and the reasons that make parents decide to divorce are incredibly stressful, and depression is a possibility for both you and your parents. Taking care of yourself is your most important job here. Encourage your parent to talk to a counselor, but remember that taking care of your parent is a burden you should never have to bear.

Q One of my parents will move away after the divorce. How can I stay in touch?

A Phone calls are a great choice here, especially if you set up a specific time to talk each week, or even each day. Webcam programs like Skype and instant messaging are also great, along with email. If your parent is up to it and you're old enough, social networking websites such as Facebook are good options, too. Time in between visits can be tough, but staying in touch can make it more bearable.

Q Will I get a stepfamily?

A It's a definite possibility. Some kids get a stepparent, if not the entire stepfamily, quickly after the divorce, while others never get one. Personally, it took five years before my mom remarried. If you do get a stepparent, though, communication is essential. A new stepparent may feel like a threat to you and your place in the family, but if you are open with them it can ease the transition. Stepparents don't have to replace your own parents; if all goes well, they can be a great addition to your family. The most important thing here is to keep an open mind.

Q It's really hurting me that my parents are divorcing. Who can I talk to?

A You may want to consider talking to a counselor or a psychologist. Many kids (and adults) are embarrassed to see a counselor, but there is no shame in realizing you need more help and seeing one. I did it myself, and I would do it again. If you're worried about money, remember that many insurance plans cover counseling appointments, so you may get a certain number of visits free or for less money. If you feel too uncomfortable to do this or still feel like you can't afford it, try talking to your school guidance counselor, a teacher you feel comfortable with, or a religious leader. They're trained to deal with situations like this and they will be able to help you. Talking to close friends is also a good idea, especially if their own parents are divorced.

Q Is it normal to have divorced parents? I feel like I'm the only one...

A Unfortunately, it's completely normal to have divorced parents. About half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce, which means a lot of kids grow up with divorced parents. I felt like I was the only one, too, until I asked for advice on dealing with divorce on my Facebook page. All of a sudden, a lot of my friends started volunteering to help, telling me that their own parents had been divorced, or were in the process of getting a divorce; but if I hadn't asked, I would have thought I was the only one. You're not alone, and you don't have to do this by yourself. Ask around at school, and I guarantee you'll find others whose parents are divorced. They're also great resources if you feel like talking about the divorce, because they understand what you're dealing with. You're not the only one; other people have made it through this, and though it's not going to be an easy experience, you can, too.

My Divorce Story

This is just to give you a sample of one person's life after divorce. Not everyone's experience is like this, but I've noticed over the years that there are many themes that other kids and teens can relate to, so I've shared it here to give you an idea of what life after divorce can be like.

I had just come home from the last day of school in my 10th grade. I checked the answering machine for new messages and I found what I had least expected - a message from my mom's divorce lawyer. Even though all the warning signs had been there, I was still surprised. Things were bad between my parents, and my mom had already threatened to divorce my dad once that year. They started going out on dates again afterwards, though, and I thought they were past all that. Before things turned sour, I thought my family was completely normal. One of my friends had even commented that my family was perfect. It turns out, not so much.

It's not like I hadn't seen it coming - at one point, I'd even hoped my parents would divorce. I remember sitting in front of the computer, with my music turned up so I didn't have to hear them fight. I turned to the Internet for help, but unsurprisingly Google searches for "parents who should divorce," "how to make your parents divorce," and "help for kids whose parents are fighting and should break up" didn't really turn up any results.

The year before the divorce, I'd actually become something of a therapist to both of my parents in my quest to not only keep them together, but more importantly have some control over the situation. In this role, I learned more about the problems behind the scenes in their marriage. I think it was easier to learn about it this way than all at once when the divorce came out. It's also easier not to judge your parents when you're hearing about events directly from them. That said, it was still extremely difficult for me, and acting like a therapist was far more pressure than I could take.

Even though it was a painful living situation, when it came down to it and my mom told me that she was going to divorce my dad (the first time), despite the fact that I had once wished for them to divorce, I had a change of heart and begged my dad not to let it happen. I went through most of the stages of grief - the one I remember most vividly was that of bargaining. I told my dad he just had to make it through when I graduated from high school, just two more years, then they could get divorced. I'm sure I ripped his heart to shreds with that, because ultimately it wasn't his decision.

My parents officially divorced that September, although we waited to move until two weeks later. It was an abrupt change - one day I was living among the piles of boxes at my house, and the next I was sleeping on a mattress on the ground in a foreign house, going to a completely different bus stop in a different neighborhood. My 17th birthday was only a matter of months after the divorce, and it was a nightmare. Both of my parents were there, along with most of the family on my mom's

side. Everyone tried to pretend that everything was normal, but it wasn't. Some of my relatives wouldn't even come, just because my dad was there. The tension was almost unbearable. I've kept events like that separate ever since.

That whole first year after the divorce was really stressful for me, although I settled into a routine after about six months. I couldn't stand conflict in any form, not even during classroom debates or watching TV shows I'd previously enjoyed, like NCIS. I ignored my own stress, and used the poor coping technique of taking on other people's problems to avoid dealing with my own (a bad idea, as I eventually learned). Between home stress, school stress, and the added stress of other people's problems, I almost broke under the pressure. The fact that I didn't talk to anyone about the divorce at first, worried that it would reflect poorly on my parents, probably didn't help my stress levels. I'm grateful that I used the coping mechanism of keeping a journal about my experience, which I think really helped me manage stress. My journal kept me sane.

In that first year I ran into a lot of changes, both good and bad, that I had never encountered before. My parents both started dating soon after the divorce, a change that I found quite strange and even stressful. My mom made an effort to spend more time with my sister and me and started cooking family dinners for the first time. However, I had trouble finding time that my dad could spend with me, even though he only lived three miles away. I fought to maintain a relationship with him, but what time we spent together was often tense.

It was only in second year after the divorce that I started talking about the impact of the divorce on me, and it took two more years to stop censoring what I told my friends. Even private people like me need a support system, though, and since you can't grow one overnight, I ended up seeing a therapist. I can honestly say it helped a lot and I wish I had made the decision to see one earlier.

Divorce continues to have a ripple effect on my family, even though it's been several years now and I don't live at home anymore, but the effects have gotten less and less each year, to the point where now I don't think about it often. I've also benefited from some positive effects of divorce, such as greater independence, good negotiating skills, and a closer relationship with my sister. On top of that, I've benefited from a larger family; my mom got remarried recently and I now have SEVEN stepsiblings and a stepfather. After a long period of getting to know each other, my step-dad and I now have a good relationship, although I'm still getting acquainted with my stepsiblings.

I wish I could say that everything's perfect now in the aftermath of divorce - that my parents get along great and my sister and I see both of them regularly. But that's not the point of this. Life after a divorce is messy, and nothing in life is ever perfect. What I can tell you is that my parents love both my sister and me a great deal, even though they no longer love each other. And I can safely say that with each year that passes we work through more issues, and my family becomes happier and more stable. What I've learned from this experience is that things do get better, and there is life after divorce if you can just hang in there. I'm looking forward to the future.