

# Life After Divorce

## What are the Effects of Divorce on the Relationship Between Parent and Child?

Marital separation results in some fundamental changes in the relationship between parents and children. First we will discuss the relationship of children with their custodial parent who have daycare, contact care, and responsibility.

### Single Custodial Parents:

Find that children provide structure and meaning to their lives yet do not keep them from feeling lonely.

Usually become closer and more responsive to the children.

May think of themselves, and be seen by others, as having sole responsibility for the children, which may make them more vulnerable to anxiety and guilt over the children's shortcomings.

May find the children more willful and harder to control, and may be anxious that the children seem to be getting out of hand.

May have to cope with children who try to assume the absent parent's authority.

Usually do more negotiating with children over rules and standards than parents living together; children have more power in single parent homes.

Are spared from another adult's undercutting their authority or wishes.



Relationships with extended family, grandparents, and aunts and uncles, are often affected by divorce.

May find a new cooperative spirit in the home as children's contributions to family functioning become essential.

May exaggerate the positive or negative qualities they see in their children because of the absence of another adult with who they can discuss their views of their children.

May get caught up in an "aggravation cycle," which the parent attempts to tolerate, builds until there is a sudden release of anger, perhaps heightened by panic, after which the parent is remorseful. They are likely to be overburdened with decisions, tasks, and tension, and may find too little time for

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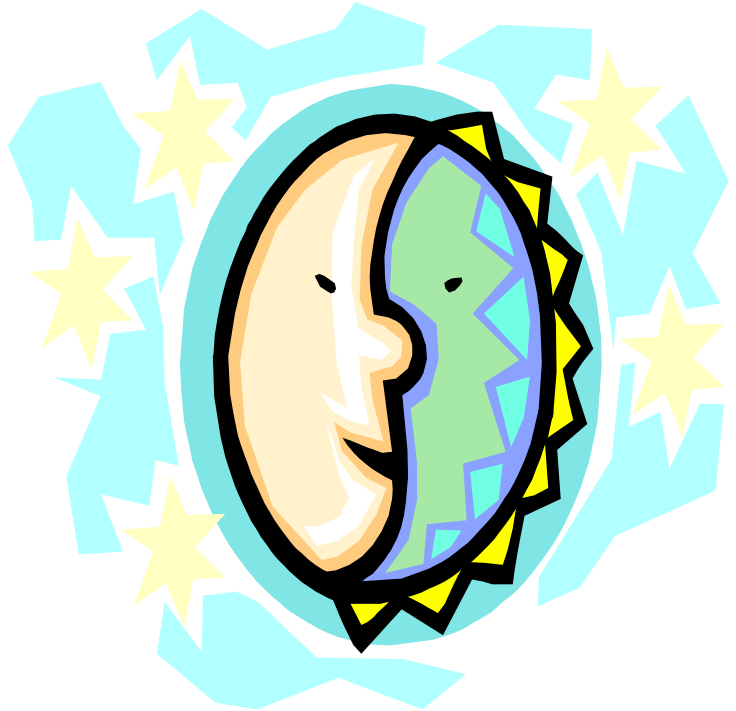
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## Effects of Divorce (Continued)

themselves.

Need to get away from the unrelenting responsibility of child-care, yet may feel guilty about leaving the children. Some parents lessen their guilt by negotiating with their children for time off.

Need to show the same understanding indulgence to themselves that they often feel called upon to exhibit to their children.



## Children's Relationship with Non-Custodial Parent

**"Consistency helps  
children feel safe"**

Non-custodial parents are no longer a member of the children's household, and are likely to feel out of touch with the events of their children's lives. If the child forgets to report a crucial event to the non-custodial parent, the emotions connected may have passed.

### **Non-Custodial Parent:**

- must invest much energy in maintaining their relationship with the children.

- usually have fears of losing a place of importance in their children's lives.

- may experience distress after visiting the children,

- particularly in the beginning, and this may lead some parent's to cut down on the frequency of visits.

- may be the target of their children's anger, a reaction to their separation distress.

- usually have only as much voice in the children's lives as the custodial parent allows. This may be especially painful for men who had formally been treated as the head of the household and final authority in household matters. Taking the role of consultant and advising children on their persistent worries may be one way to bridge the gap.

- may feel helpless in protecting their children against many sources of threats; predatory adults, bad companions, and the children's own naivete and recklessness. Again, this may be especially painful for a parent whose role had been viewed as the protector of the family. Despite these losses, the non-custodial parent does serve as a reserve parent should anything happen to the custodial parent.

- if male, may be disappointed to discover that separation has reduced the extent to which they are seen as the children's source



## Children's Relationship with Non-Custodial Parents (continued)

of financial support, even though child support is being paid. The custodial parent is usually perceived as responsible for the family income, and the non-custodial parent's financial contribution is often viewed as just one more income source. The mother may view the father's subsidization as her payment for caring for his children, as a return on her past investment in the father, or as a reparation for injury. Fathers may search for other means to retain their role as providers, such as treating the children to expensive outings, vacations, or presents.

-may have difficulty in finding a satisfactory place to visit with their children. Seeing the children in the custodial parent's home may be comfortable for the children but painful for the adults, while public places may be expensive and contribute to the sense of artificiality. Having a residence spacious enough to accommodate the children eliminates these difficulties.

-may find that their adolescent children have plans of their own and be resistant to visits. Some parents handle this indifference by requiring adolescents to initiate contact.

-who have children of different ages and sexes may find that taking them out together may not work because of their different interests.

-if female, may be especially vulnerable to feelings of guilt and the hostile reactions of others because of the traditional view of the mother as the crucial parent in the child's life.

-will not be forgotten or become adults to whom the children are indifferent. Most often the non-custodial parent remains as a respected, loved, and valued figure for their children.

**"Most often the non-custodial parent remains as a respected, loved, and valued figure for their children."**

## Who Should Tell The Children About Divorce?

The presence of both parents decreases the chance of one parent blaming the other for the breakup of the marriage. If one parent is reluctant, it is advisable that the other parent convey the information. What is important is that children be told. Serious consequences can result if separation takes place before the children are told. Parents who disappear for no reason may be assumed by the children to be dead.

Children should be informed of parent's departure as soon as they are old enough to distinguish their parents from strangers. In the absence of good information about what a child can com-

prehend, it is a good idea to convey the message in the hope that it will be understood at some level. When both parents tell all of the children at once it maximizes the chances that the children will hear the same story, and permits them to be a support for each other. Telling the children separately may create an atmosphere of distrust and secretiveness, may result in children's "comparing notes", and runs the risk of a child's being told by a brother or sister.

Parents may resist such an open discussion because they fear revealing their feeling of hurt, anger, or bitterness. However, if they feel this way, the children have proba-

bly sensed it. It is advisable for parents to express their emotions in moderation, to serve as a role model in fostering the expression of emotions by their children. Such expression will lessen the occurrence of various harmful reactions to the separation.

Credit: Alabama Cooperative Extension





## What Should Children Be Told About the Divorce?

One divorce expert, Richard Gardner, believes that children have a right to know what is happening to them, and that that parents should be appropriately truthful without making their lives an open book for their children. He suggests that giving reasons promotes trust at a time when children most need it. The problem with this advice is that parents themselves are often confused about “what went wrong” and the line between the children’s right to know and the parent’s right to privacy is not well defined. In the absence of hard and fast rules, some guidelines can be given.

1. Telling the truth, even though painful, can reduce the likelihood that children’s fantasies will run wild, and it will contribute to the children’s trust in their parents. In dealing with questions the parent does not want to

answer, the parent should refuse gently instead of being evasive or answering with half truths.

2. The children should not be confronted with too much information at one time. They need time to absorb the information. Provide an atmosphere in which children are free to ask questions. The children may need to ask questions repeatedly in order to get used to the information. The parent’s recognition and acceptance of this process will help the children’s healthy transition through this period.
3. Each child should get essentially the same information. Providing more information to one child than another may cause anger and distrust in the less informed child.