



EXTENSION

# Helping Children of Divorce Understand Their Feelings

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One of the key ways to help children deal with the stress of divorce is by helping them to identify, understand and express their emotions. Children of all ages may experience significant behavior and emotional changes within the first year after a divorce. Although many symptoms often resolve with time, the child's sense of loss and emotional trauma can last for many years. Research suggests that simply identifying or naming an emotion can significantly alleviate distress in individuals. Helping children identify how they feel about their experiences regarding their parents' divorce, then validating the emotion, helps them to feel understood and not alone in their feelings.

Children of all ages vary in their personalities, their ability to manage stress and how they typically express themselves. There are several key things parents can do however to assist their children in talking about their feelings.

## Consider These Things First

- **Help your child know it's safe to talk about their feelings.**

Make yourself approachable to your children. When parents are stressed and distracted, their children may not reach out to them. Parents may need to work actively to invite their children to express themselves—even if it means that their children's emotion is directed at the parent. A simple activity at bedtime or around the dinner table where each family member presents a 'high' and 'low' part of their day can jumpstart open discussions about feelings. For example:

**Low:** An opportunity for the child to express the hardest or worst part of their day.

**Example:** "I didn't get to talk to Dad on the phone today and really miss him."

**High:** An opportunity for the child to share the best part of their day.

**Example:** "Mom bought me ice cream today after school to celebrate the 100 percent I got on the spelling test!"

Make it safe for children to talk about their other parent in your home. Though it may be hard to hear about the 'good' things your co-parent does, it is very important that

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you allow your children to talk about their other parent around you. This not only helps your children continue to express their feelings, but also lets them know that they do not have to hide a part of their lives from you.

- **Help your children name their emotions.** There are many emotions beyond just 'happy' and 'sad,' so try using a tool such as a 'feelings chart' to help your child identify their specific emotions. Many parents find it helpful to keep a feelings chart on the refrigerator in their homes so their children can identify how they are feeling daily. You can even use the chart to target a new emotion and ask your child 'Tell me about a time when you felt \_\_\_\_.'
- **Help your child identify how their body reacts or responds to different emotions.** People experience stress in different ways and even feel it in different parts of their body (stomachaches, headaches, tight muscles in their back). Helping children to understand their own bodies and stress responses can assist in their ability to cope with the stress sooner and better.
- **Seek out professional help as needed.** Learning how to be more aware of your child's emotions may require that you are more aware of your own emotions. Going through a divorce brings a wide range of emotions and sometimes avoiding them may feel like it helps one to survive the divorce process. Expressing your emotions in front of your child may distract your child from them expressing their own or they may even try to help their parents cope. Parents may do well to get help for their own emotions but to also learn more about how to help their children cope as well.



Try these age appropriate activities to help your child identify, understand and express their emotions:

### Toddler and Younger Children

**Match.** Make faces out of paper with removable facial features cutouts. Make a variation of shapes for eyes and mouths so the child can practice different pairings and name the emotion they make with the facial features.

**Draw the Emotion.** Have the child draw out the emotion they are feeling. Discuss the drawing with the child. Sometimes just expressing the emotion on paper and getting to talk about it safely is all the child needs. You can also use paint, play-dough or other creative objects you have around the house. Talk about the different colors they used and what feelings fit with the colors.

**Feeling Box.** This works great for anxiety. Allow the child to draw or write down things they worry about and place them in the “feelings box.” The child can call their box whatever they like, but the idea is to put their worries in a safe place so they can take a break from thinking about them. Allow children to decorate their box how they like.

**Reading.** While reading books, point out to the child the emotions the characters of the book are experiencing at various times in the story. This allows them to recognize emotions and encourages empathy towards others. Example of book resources for younger children include: *Listen to My Body* by Gabi Garcia and *Niko Draws a Feeling* by Robert Racza.

### Older Elementary and Junior High

**Masks.** Draw a picture of a mask (or find one online and print it out). Have the child draw the feelings on the front of the mask they let others see. Now, flip the mask over and have

them draw feelings that they might hide from others, or do not like to show others. Discuss these things with them.

**Charades.** Use the feelings chart to write down various feelings on pieces of paper. Just like traditional Charades, without talking, each family member acts out a feeling and allows the others to guess.

**Body Reflections.** Talk about where the children specifically feel their emotions in their body. Then talk about how ‘much’ they feel the sensation on a scale of 0 (none at all) to 10 (a lot).

**Reading.** Examples of book resources for this age include: *The Feelings Book: The Care and Keeping of Your Emotions* by Dr. Lynda Madison and *Coping Skills for Kids Workbook: Over 75 Coping Strategies to Help Kids Deal with Stress, Anxiety, and Anger* by Janine Halloran.

### Junior High and High School

**Music.** Have your teen find different songs that evoke various emotions.

**Conversation Starters.** Use conversation starters to explore feelings with your child.

**Example:** “Sometimes I worry about \_\_\_\_\_.”

**Example:** “How can your family show you they love you?”

**Example:** “What were you doing the last time you felt really happy?”

**Reading.** Examples of book resources for this age include: *A Still Quiet Place for Teens: A Mindfulness Workbook to Ease Stress and Difficult Emotions* by Amy Saltzman, MD. and *Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills for Helping You Manage Mood Swings, Control Angry Outbursts and Get Along with Others* by Sheri Van Kijk, MSW.

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