



18 Key Steps to Helping Your Child Through the Divorce Process

C.E.L. & Associates, Inc.

Divorce Mediation and Parenting Coordinator Services

1. Be available to listen.
2. To the extent possible, tell your children why you are divorcing. And if possible, no matter how painful, try to tell them when the whole family (including both spouses and all children) is together.
3. Be yourself. You can't be both parents.
4. Reassure your children early and often that your divorce is not their fault.
5. Don't use the child as a messenger in parental communications, as in "Tell your father he's late with the child support payment."
6. Don't argue or fight with your spouse while the child is listening. Experts say the amount of conflict the child witnesses during and immediately after divorce is a crucial factor in his or her adjustment.
7. Divorce is a time of great change for both of you and for your children. Try to minimize these changes. For example, try to keep them in the same school and home if possible, as well as the same afternoon and evening activities.
8. Try to use consistent discipline. For example, try to agree with each other about what movies or TV programs are permitted, what bedtime is appropriate, what language is permitted, etc.
9. Don't use the child as a weapon. Children need quality time with both parents. It's unfair to restrict access to one parent, no matter how willing the children may seem at the time.
10. Don't use the child as a spy. If they want to tell you about time spent with their other parent (and they usually don't), listen closely and politely, and then stop. If they don't volunteer any information, try simply, "Have a good time? Good."
11. Don't make your children take sides in any dispute with your spouse. Children generally want to make both their parents happy. Don't make them choose.

12. Don't criticize your spouse in front of the child. Remember that your spouse is still your child's parent; when you criticize your spouse, whether you mean to or not, you're also criticizing your child indirectly.
13. Let your child be a child. It's easy, but wrong, to make your adolescent child, or even your adult child, a confidant in dealing with your recovery, current dating life, or your fears. Even if children seem capable of handling these concerns without ill effects, they rarely are.
14. Don't be afraid to get outside help. Sometimes children of divorcing parents are angry or scared, and they don't know how to deal with their feelings. They "act out," meaning they misbehave. When your children "act out," a professional counselor or therapist may be helpful to coach them through more constructive ways of expressing their feelings.
15. Keep your promises. Don't make promises you don't know you can keep. Consistently keeping your promises lets your child know that he or she can trust you, who will help him or her adjust to your divorce more easily. Divorcing parents often make unrealistic promises out of guilt. If you've made a promise and realize later you can't keep it, acknowledge it to your child. You may think he or she has forgotten about the promise, but this rarely happens.
16. Don't give up. Even if you're separated by distance, there are many things you can do to be a good parent.
17. Take care of yourself. One of the easiest mistakes to make in divorce is to get so busy dealing with everyone else's pain that you forget to get help for yourself. Enter counseling, meet with your minister or rabbi, and talk to your plants, anything you can think of to keep your own sanity. You owe it to yourself, and you owe it to your kids.
18. Maintain relationships and routines. One of the many reasons divorce is so painful for children is that their relationship with each parent is constantly being tested and redefined. One of the gifts you can give your children is to allow as many parts of their life as possible to remain unchanged, including relationships with grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors and friends.