



Joan E. LeFebvre
Family Living Agent

Parenting the Preschooler

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/pp/>

Co-Parenting Children After Divorce

Every year more than a million American couples get divorced. For those men and women, it is often the most stressful and emotionally exhausting experience of their lives. For the children, it can be even worse. Young children whose parents divorce often suffer from depression, sleep disorders, loss of self-esteem, behavior regression, and other physical and emotional problems.

Common Reaction of Preschoolers	What Parents Can Do
Blames self for divorce and feels guilty Confused Fears abandonment Aggressive, has temper tantrums Returns to security items - blanket, teddy bear, etc. Lapses in toilet training Tries to convince self that all is OK Is emotionally needy	Assure the child that both parents love them and will continue to take care of them Give additional affection and support Tell your child about any changes in living arrangements Give children permission to love both parents Avoid angry outbursts at the other parent Make child care provider/preschool aware of changes taking place in family

Children may feel conflicted about being loyal to both parents. A child may feel “caught in the middle.” Following are some situations where parents put children in the middle, how these situations affect your children, and suggestions for other ways you might handle the situations that show love and support towards your children.

Putting Children in the Middle	Child’s Feelings	How to Avoid Putting Children in the Middle
<input type="checkbox"/> When the child comes home late after spending time with the other parent, you get angry with the child.	Child may feel anger toward both parents, sadness, feel they are treated unfairly.	Welcome the child home telling him/her how happy you are to see them. If getting children back late is a recurring problem, talk directly to other parent.
<input type="checkbox"/> You tell your children the divorce was your mother’s (father’s) idea.	Child may place blame on other parent.	Accept the divorce and move on with your life. Avoid blaming.

Putting Children in the Middle

You tell your children they can always go live with the other parent if they don't like it here.

You ask your child to take messages to the other parent: "Take these medical bills to your (other parent)."

You question your child about the other parent--what they are doing, who they are dating, what they said to the child, how they are feeling.

You tell your child the other parent does not care for the child. Or you put-down the other parent or say nasty things about the other parent in the hearing of the children.

You say to the child that even though you are divorced, you may get back together someday.

You deny the children time to visit the other parent saying that it is too hard on you and that you miss the children too much.

Child's Feelings

Child may become anxious and fearful about expressing their feelings and thoughts.

Child may feel torn and resentful.

Asking a child to "spy" on the other parent is damaging to their emotional well-being.

Your child can lose respect for both parents as well as have a lowered self-esteem because children are part of both parents.

A child may fantasize that parents will get back together.

Every child wants to be a part of each parent's life; anger and resentment will result if you deny a child time with the other parent.

How to Avoid Putting Children in the Middle

Realize that getting children to follow rules and be responsible takes time. They may be having a tough time adjusting. Be patient and consistent in applying your household rules.

Learn to communicate directly with the other parent, not through the children. Children do not want to be involved in parent's fights.

Consider why you are doing this--curiosity or to feel better about yourself--that the other parent is not doing OK. Avoid asking about the other parent. Find other interests in your life.

You may be angry at the other parent or feel the children should know the "truth" about the other parent. However, it is damaging to the children. Try to say something positive: "I can't get along with Daddy (Mommy), but you certainly can and I hope you two will continue to have a good relationship."

Avoid encouraging thoughts of reconciliation.

Creating a new life for yourself is not easy, but is necessary. Use the time when children are with the other parent to join a club, visit the library, participate as a community volunteer, etc.

Create a working business relationship with the other parent. Think about people with whom you have a business relationship. How do you talk with them (direct, courteous, set appointments)? Very seldom do people have emotional outbursts with people who have business relationships. Stepping back from your own anger and pain and, instead, seeking a business relationship with the other parent that makes it easier for you both to focus on the "business" of parenting.

Not all children have emotional or behavioral problems after divorce. When the divorcing couple work together as co-parents, most children cope with the change fairly well.

Sources:

Edith Felts-Grabarski, Joan E. LeFebvre, Bernadette Mayek, and Kathryn Miller. University of Wisconsin Extension "Effects of Divorce on Children Divorce Curricula" (unpublished draft). 1999.

"Stepping Back from Anger." American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. (Undated.)

Author: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension

Reviewer: Dave Riley, Extension Specialist, Child Development and Early Education, UW-Madison

Layout: Penny Otte, Program Assistant I, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

For more information on Parenting the Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
April, 2000