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Helping Kids Cope with a Divorce

Since about 1 out of 2 marriages in the U.S. end in divorce, many American children are affected by divorce each year. Those kids often feel trapped in the middle as the family splits up. If mommy and daddy don't love each other, they wonder, do they love me?

Anger, fear, separation anxiety, a sense of abandonment, sadness, and embarrassment are common reactions for most children. Some children may feel they are to blame for the divorce.

During the first couple of years after a divorce, your stress may get in the way of your ability to parent well. You can help make sure your children have a healthier transition when you:

- **Tell them you love them. And tell them often.** Provide a secure relationship with both parents.
- **Be open and honest.** Explain in terms for their age the basic reason for your divorce. Your children must be told that they're not to blame.
- **Keep your kids out of it.** Your divorce is between you and your spouse. Don't use your children as pawns, spies, or marriage counselors. Be sure to tell them that it's not their fault, and don't share more information than your child is asking for. Don't discuss each other's faults or problems with the child.
- **Don't pull your children into your arguments.** If they are not part of the argument, keep them out of it.
- **Don't criticize each other in front of your child or when your child can overhear you.** If this does happen, talk to your child and explain that when people are angry, they sometimes say things that are mean and hurtful.

- **Provide consistency.** Coordinate with your ex-spouse about having the same house rules, bedtime, curfew, extracurricular activities, and favorite foods.
- **Offer professional help.** This could be individual counseling or a divorce group. Community agencies, schools, or courts provide them. Admit that the situation is sad and upsetting for everyone. Talk to your child's school psychologist or school counselor if they need more emotional support.

If your kids aren't overwhelmed by feelings of responsibility surrounding your divorce, they'll generally mature sooner. They will also become more independent and have higher self-esteem than kids who are left with unresolved feelings of responsibility and guilt.

You and your spouse once loved each other. Remind your children of this, and that from that love, they are the greatest gift.