

Divorcing parents need to put children's needs first

My son and his wife are getting divorced. What can they do to make things less difficult for their two children?

Divorce is almost always harder on children than parents. Besides the major disruption in family life, they have no control over the situation and often feel helpless, angry, sad, guilty and abandoned. But parents can take steps to help children adjust.

Many books have been written on the topic, and several educational Web sites offer assistance, too. A few good ones include Ohio State University Extension's Ohioline (<http://ohioline.osu.edu>; search for "Divorce") and the University of Minnesota's "Parents Forever" site (http://webdev.extension.umn.edu/parents_forever/parents.html).

Guidelines for parents include:

- Tell children what's going on. Many parents fear talking to children about an impending break-up, but studies say it's best to tell them right away, and it should come from both parents at the same time. Parents need to make it clear that getting back together is not possible. They should avoid telling young children "we don't love each other anymore," because children might fear that they could lose their parents' love.

- Never put children in the middle. Even something that seems innocuous — asking children to convey a simple message or asking them to deliver a note to the other parent — could prove demanding for a child.

- Resist the urge to become overly permissive. Whether it's due to fatigue or feelings of guilt, divorcing parents may let discipline slide. But



during this time of upheaval, children need the security of limits and boundaries.

- When moving children between households, keep the transition as simple as possible. Often, making the switch before or after another activity, such as a soccer game or other after-school activity, is helpful because it's a time when children switch gears anyway. But every family is different — watch for signs of stress and try to reduce them.

- Talk positively about the other parent. When kids hear negative things about a parent, they may believe something is wrong with them, too, since they have part of both parents in them.

- Never ask the children take sides. It's a no-win situation for them.

All in all, don't make assumptions about children's reactions to the divorce. Every child reacts differently — sometimes their well-being may actually improve compared with before, especially if the family situation was abusive or the conflict level was high. But sometimes, parents misinterpret children's silence or seeming indifference to the situation to mean they have accepted it. Instead, that's often a sign of denial, or that the change in family life is too much to accept. If stress-related behaviors remain intense or prolonged for several months, professional counseling as a family unit may be helpful.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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