

Spotlighting Teen Issues

**for
Parents**

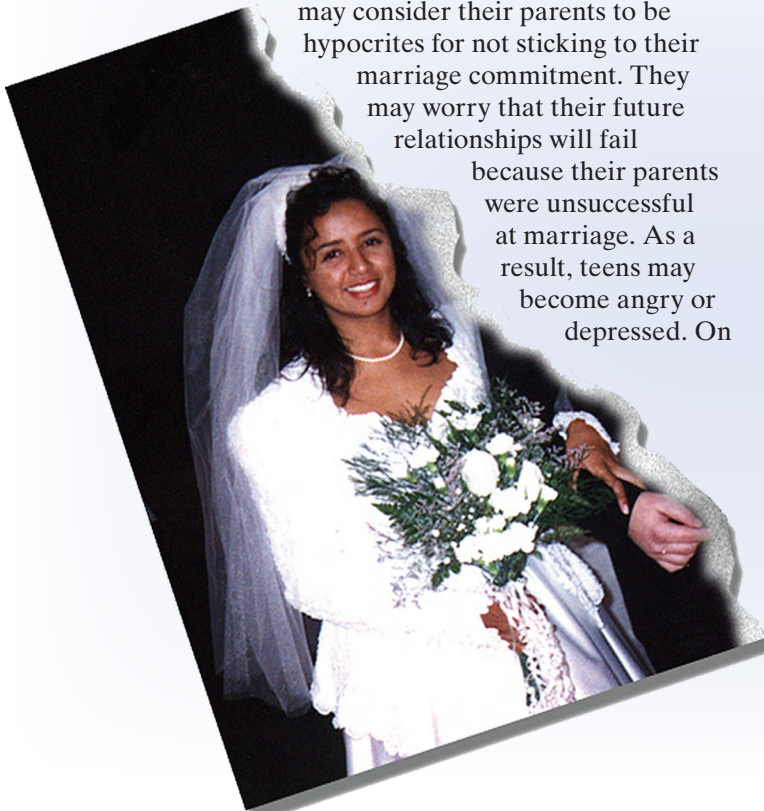
Tips for Divorcing Parents

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Most children whose parents divorce learn to cope with the divorce and go on to lead successful and healthy lives. Yet, children of divorce are more than twice as likely as children in intact marriages to have long-term problems emotionally, mentally and socially. How you and your spouse handle your relationship with each other and with your children after the divorce will be the most important factor in how well your teens recover from this difficult experience.

How Will My Teen React to Our Divorce?

Teens can understand what it means for their parents to divorce, but they usually do not accept divorce or separation. Teens are forming their own sense of morals and hold parents to the highest possible standards. They may consider their parents to be hypocrites for not sticking to their marriage commitment. They may worry that their future relationships will fail because their parents were unsuccessful at marriage. As a result, teens may become angry or depressed. On



the other hand, teens from high-conflict families may feel relieved when their parents divorce, if the conflict stops. Even so, they will probably feel sad because their dream of what their family could have been is lost.

What Changes Might I Expect?

Teens can exhibit a wide range of beliefs and behaviors in response to parents' divorce.

Teens may

- Lose trust in their parents because they feel cheated, betrayed or rejected by one or both parents.
- Lose self-esteem and worry about being loved and loveable.
- Judge parents harshly because of the divorce.
- Be embarrassed or upset by any change in parents' sexual behavior.
- Take more risks and rebel more than normal (experiment with drugs, alcohol, sex or delinquent behavior).
- Behave much better than normal because they think they can save the marriage by changing their behavior.
- Become more dependent because they are afraid to leave their parents.
- Take sides with one parent against the other.

What Can I Do to Help My Teen Cope?

- Give your teens the chance to express their feelings honestly. Don't chide them for having those feelings. Try to understand why they might feel the way they do. Explain the situation as truthfully as you can, without sharing all the gory details or blaming the other parent.
- If your teens don't want to talk with you or the other parent, encourage them to share with another trusted adult (a relative, family friend, teacher or guidance counselor, or another professional).

- Try to keep to regular routines as much as possible.
- Continue to keep track of teens' activities: where they are, what they are doing, and whom they are with.
- Remind them that although the family is changing, children should show respect for both parents, follow house rules, do their best in school, and so on. Parents should be respectful to each other as an example.
- Resist the urge to use children as replacements for the missing partner: parents should find adult sources of support and have an adult social life. They should not depend on their children to fill empty places left by the divorce or separation.
- Seek the help of a professional if your teen shows signs of depression, self-destructive behaviors or suicidal behavior.

Teens Need Contact With Both Parents

Though teens are beginning to separate from their parents, they still have a strong need to spend time with their parents. A divorce can make this more difficult, especially for the non-residential parent. Parents of teens need a parenting plan that will allow for a flexible schedule permitting teens to be involved in their normal activities, such as sports, band, job and time with friends. However, make sure your teen spends some time with each parent, if possible. Be persistent in planning time together. Also, take advantage of technology, such as cell phones, e-mail and instant messaging. These tools can allow you to be connected, even when you are far apart.

Be as flexible and available as possible. Teens value parents who are there when they need them. That does not mean you have to be there physically. Teens just need to know that their parents are available to talk when they need them.

What Are Signs That My Teen Is Not Adjusting Well?

Teens who are having difficulty adjusting to their parents' divorce may show any of the following signs:

- Academic and/or behavior problems at school
- Change in friends and activities
- Moodiness and withdrawal
- Aggression and/or acting out
- Increase in physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches
- Increased level of rebellion

Where can I go for help?

Talk to a school guidance counselor, an independent counselor, a therapist or a psychologist who works with children going through divorce. Find out if there are classes or support groups for teens whose parents have divorced. Take a parenting class dealing with children and divorce, such as UT Extension's Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting classes. If you are concerned, you should seek professional help.

For More Information

UT Extension Family & Consumer Sciences -
<http://fcs.tennessee.edu/>

Neuman, M.G. (1998) *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Times Books.

Strasheim, C. Divorce Through the Eyes of Adolescents, University of Nebraska Extension, <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/pages/publicationD.jsp?publicationId=281>

Kirby, J.J., & Dean, K. (2002). Teens and Divorce: What Hurts and What Helps. Ohio State University Extension. <http://ohioline.osu.edu/flm02/FS11.html>



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the Family and Consumer Sciences Web site at <http://www.utextension.utk.edu/fcs/>

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