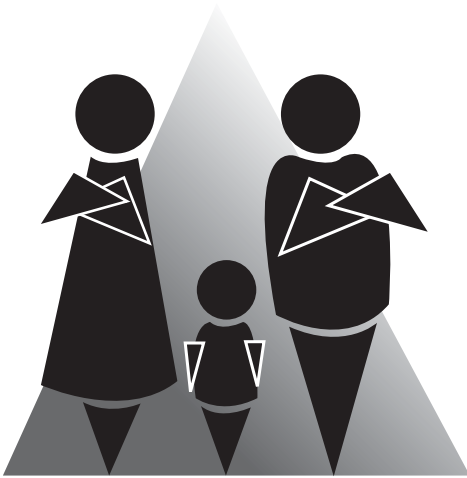


**EXTENSION PROGRAMS**

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Are Your Children in the  
**MIDDLE**  
 of Your Conflict or Divorce?

**Talking with Your Children**

**A**mong the first questions parents must answer in a separation or divorce are how, when and what to tell their children. Because telling children may be painful, parents could be tempted to delay this task. It is usually better for children, however, to know about the decision immediately, and before a parent moves. The way this information is presented can set the tone for a child's response. If possible, both parents should tell each of their children about the divorce at the same time.

Although individual responses may vary, parents need to know children will be anxious and worried about what this situation means. They need to think about several questions. The following are ways you can help your children survive your divorce. Check off the ones you have done and circle the ones you plan to do.

**What do children need to know?**

- ▶ Their parents love them.
- ▶ They did not cause the divorce.
- ▶ Neither parent is rejecting them.
- ▶ They still have a family even though their parents will no longer be married.
- ▶ Their parents will love them forever, even though their feelings for each other have changed.
- ▶ Their parents will continue to take care of them.
- ▶ There is a reason for the divorce. Parents should agree on an explanation in advance, remembering that too many details may confuse children.
- ▶ Some things will stay the same, and others will change. Commonly, children might ask who they will live with, when they will see the other parent and family members such as grandparents, and where they will go to school.
- ▶ Children need to know their parents will consider their feelings when making important decisions.

- ▶ Because divorce is upsetting to everyone, parents need to assure their children things will work out and life will improve.
- ▶ Their parents love them. Although this seems repetitive, the children's biggest fear is that their parents no longer love them.

**How can parents help children during a divorce?**

**Reassurance**

- ▶ Assure your children the divorce was not their fault.
- ▶ Assure your children both parents love them.
- ▶ Tell your children it's OK to feel sad because they miss the other parent.

**Stability**

- ▶ Maintain the individual relationships you have with each of your children. Encourage the other parent to do the same.
- ▶ Stick to a daily routine with your children.
- ▶ Make changes in your children's lives slowly, letting them discuss these changes with you.
- ▶ Reward your children for their efforts in making these changes.

**Encouragement**

- ▶ Encourage your children to continue to pursue their interests.
- ▶ Parents should spend some time with each child individually.
- ▶ Encourage your children to play with friends and participate in other age-appropriate activities.

**What don't children need to know?**

Unless the other parent is a genuine threat, children shouldn't know anything that





# Are Your Children in the MIDDLE of your Conflict or Divorce?

## Talking With Your Children

might affect that relationship negatively. Parents need to be truthful with their children, but should avoid discussing issues such as money or extra-marital affairs.

### What do children worry about?

- ▶ Children worry about the parent who is leaving. (Where will Dad live? How will Mom manage? Will Dad be safe? Will Mom be comfortable and happy?)
- ▶ Children worry they will be forced to take sides by their parents, grandparents or other family members.
- ▶ Children worry they will have to choose one parent over the other.
- ▶ Children worry about how family occasions, such as birthdays and holidays, will be celebrated.
- ▶ Children worry about disrupted routines. (Who will take care of them when they're sick? Who will take them to soccer practice or piano lessons? Who will sign their report cards?) Parents should ask their children what they are worried about, recognizing that children might not be able to identify their concerns initially.

### What can parents do to reassure children?

- ▶ Once parents have identified their children's concerns, they should try to respond honestly to them. Important decisions, such as living arrangements, should be shared as soon as they are made.
- ▶ Encourage your children to continue to pursue their interests.

### Fairness

- ▶ Do not ask your children, either directly or indirectly, which parent they love more.
- ▶ Be fair in sharing your children's time with the other parent.

### Honesty

- ▶ Acknowledge that your children may want you and your former spouse to reunite. Do not encourage or support this wish.
- ▶ Talk with your children honestly about any changes that will affect them before they occur.

### Support

- ▶ Support your children's need to visit the other parent.
- ▶ Support your children's desire to love both of you. Tell them it's OK.

### Security

- ▶ Don't use your children as a counselor or source of emotional support. Seeing parents needy and dependent may make children feel insecure. Find an adult who can fulfill these needs for you.

- ▶ Remind your children you and your former spouse will still take care of them.

### Trust

- ▶ Show your children you trust their ability adapt to these changes.

### What shouldn't parents say?

Here is a list of destructive remarks you should not make to your children. If you find yourself saying words like these, stop and think about how they might affect your children. All of these remarks raise fear and anxiety.

- ▶ "If you don't behave, I'll send you to live with your father." Message (received by child): I don't love you.
- ▶ "You're lazy/stubborn/bad tempered, just like your mother." Message: I don't love you.
- ▶ "I could get along better here by myself." Message: You are a burden.
- ▶ "If you weren't here, I could..." Message: You are a burden.
- ▶ "Sometimes I wish I'd been the one to skip out." Message: I don't love you, and you are a burden.
- ▶ "Your father put you up to saying that." Message: I don't love you.
- ▶ "Your mom doesn't love any of us or she wouldn't have left us." Message: Your other parent doesn't love you as I do.
- ▶ "You can't trust him." Message: Your other parent is unworthy.
- ▶ "She was just no good." Message: Your other parent is unworthy.
- ▶ "If he loved you, he would send your support checks on time." Message: Your other parent does not love you.
- ▶ "If your mother is five minutes late again, you're just not going with her." Message: Your other parent is unworthy.
- ▶ "If you don't like what I buy you, ask your father to do better." Message: Your other parent is unworthy.
- ▶ "Who would you really rather be with, Mommy or Daddy?" Message: You must choose between us.
- ▶ "What is your mother saying about me?" Message: You must be on my side.



# Are Your Children in the MIDDLE of your Conflict or Divorce?

## Talking With Your Children

- ▶ “Now that you’re the little man/little woman of the house...” Message: You must give up your childhood.
- ▶ “Someday you’ll leave me, too, just like your father. Promise me that you’ll never leave.” Message: You are forced to prove you love me.
- ▶ “You’re all I have. You’re the only person I can rely on.” Message: You must give up your childhood.
- ▶ “Over my dead body!” Message: I’m angry so I’m taking it out on everyone.

### Tips for Helping Children Through Divorce

- Be as honest with them as possible.
- Acknowledge their feelings.
- Discuss upcoming changes with them.
- Give them reassurance and a sense of security.
- Be fair when discussing the other parent.
- Provide as much stability as possible.
- Support and encourage individual interests.
- Trust their ability to adapt.
- Tell them both parents love them.

If you are interested in more information on this and other related topics, please call your local LSU AgCenter parish office. Below is the list of topics in the “Are Your Children in the Middle of Your Conflict or Divorce?” series.

A Child’s View of Divorce  
The Business of Co-parenting  
Coping with Stress and Change  
Costs of Raising Children  
Custody Issues Today  
Dating Issues  
Disciplining Children  
Friendship and Support  
Help! I Feel Overwhelmed  
Loss of a Relationship  
Managing Income and Expenses  
Not Enough Hours in the Day  
Separating Your Finances  
Sharing Parenting  
Talking with Your Children  
Talking with Your Children About Money  
Talking with Your Children -- Communicating Within Your Family: Active Listening  
Visitation Do’s and Don’ts

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*Aliane D. Sasser*

This publication was originally produced by the Iowa State University Extension Service. It has been revised and made available in Louisiana by Diane D. Sasser, Ph.D., Assistant Specialist (Family Development); Rebecca E. White, Extension Associate (Family Development); and Raye T. Neely, Extension Associate (Family Development), Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, William B. Richardson, Chancellor  
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, Jack Bagent, Vice Chancellor and Director

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