

# Helping Infants and Toddlers Adjust to Divorce

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Parents often wonder how divorce affects infants and toddlers. Infants and toddlers may seem too young to understand what is happening. However, they may still be affected by stressful events. During the first three years of life, children grow quickly and become mobile, learn language, begin to understand how the world works, and form social relationships. These developments may be affected by changes in the child's environment, such as parental divorce. However, parents have the power to help their children make a positive adjustment to family changes. This guide provides information on how infants and toddlers may respond to divorce and tips for how parents can help their infants and toddlers adjust to divorce.

## Young infants and divorce (ages birth to 8 months)

Infants do not understand divorce. However, infants pick up on changes in their parents' feelings and behavior. Following a divorce, some parents may become temporarily depressed and less responsive to their infant. Young infants do not have much control over their own emotions. Their feelings are influenced by their parents' feelings. When a parent acts worried or sad around an infant, the infant is likely to feel worried or sad. Infants cannot tell adults how they feel, so adults must interpret infants' behavior. Infants may act more fussy and difficult to comfort, or seem uninterested in people or things when their parents are upset.

Until about 4 to 6 months of age, infants don't understand that things or people they can't see still exist. It is "out of sight, out of mind" for very young infants. Even when infants learn that things they can't see are still there, they don't remember things for a long time. It is hard for infants to remember and form close bonds with parents they do not see often. Between 6 and 8 months, infants develop stranger anxiety. They may act fearful or anxious around unfamiliar people. After divorce, an infant may see one parent less often than before, so the infant may show stranger anxiety around that parent. Infants are likely to feel most comfortable around both parents if they have frequent contact with both parents following divorce.

## Older infants and divorce (8 months to 18 months)

Many infants begin to show separation distress some time between 8 and 12 months of age. Infants may cry, scream or cling when a parent is leaving. It is hard for an infant to be separated from a parent, especially for a long period of time, such as overnight.

Separation can be hard for infants because they have such strong feelings for the parent.

They want to be with the parent all the time and they don't understand why they can't. It is also normal for a baby to prefer one parent over the other, typically the parent who cares for him or her the most. When parents divorce, infants may experience more separations and feel less secure. You may notice an increase in your infant's separation distress during the divorce process.

Sometimes parents of an infant divorce and one parent drops out of the child's life. If this happens, your child won't remember the other parent, but will probably become curious about the other parent. Provide short, simple, honest answers to your child's questions, such as "Your dad or mom and I couldn't get along, so he or she went to live somewhere else." Avoid saying negative things about the other parent, but reassure your child that the other parent's absence is not your child's fault. For example, you might say, "I don't know why your mom or dad is not around, but I know it has nothing to do with you." Reassure your child that you will always love and take care of him or her. Help your child form close relationships with other adults who can be role models and provide support.

## Toddlers and divorce (ages 18 months to 3 years)

### Communication

A major difference between infants and toddlers is that toddlers can use language to express thoughts and feelings. Even though toddlers are learning to use language, there are many things they don't understand. They understand that one parent is not living in the home, but they do not understand why. They also do not understand time. For example a toddler may ask, "When is Daddy coming?" and the parent may reply "You will see Daddy on Thursday." The child may ask the same question two hours later, because he doesn't understand how long it is until Thursday. This can be frustrating for parents because toddlers will often ask the same questions over and over again. It is still important to answer your toddler's questions, but to know that your toddler doesn't really understand even after you explain it.

Try to see the world through your child's eyes. Imagine what it is like to be in a confusing place where you often don't understand what is going on and have limited ability to express your thoughts and feelings.

For toddlers, the support of an adult who knows them well, understands their thoughts and feelings, and helps them express those thoughts and feelings makes a world of difference.

### Thoughts

It is hard for toddlers to see things from another person's perspective. They think about things in relation to themselves. When parents divorce, toddlers are most concerned about how their own needs will be met. Toddlers may worry about who will fix their dinner or tuck them in bed, whether the parent they live with is also going to leave, and if their parents still love them.

### Feelings

Toddlers become more aware of others' feelings and learn to express their own feelings with words and through play. They may become more aggressive or fearful when their parents divorce. Frequent shifts in emotional state are common for toddlers. One minute they are happily playing, and a few minutes later they are upset. It is hard for toddlers to manage strong feelings like sadness or anger. They may miss the parent who is gone or be angry about not being able to be with a parent. Toddlers need to know it is all right to have these feelings.

### Behavior

Toddlers can do many more things on their own than infants can. Toddlers exert their independence by frequently saying "No" to adult requests or testing limits (for example, intentionally throwing food on the floor). Toddlers' negative behavior and acting out may increase during the divorce process. Toddlers need clear, consistent rules that are enforced in a loving way. Even though they may seem very independent, toddlers need constant supervision to keep them safe.

## What you can do to help your infant or toddler adjust to divorce

### Communicate with your child's other parent

Some parenting issues require communication and coordination between parents, if the child spends time with both parents. For example, breastfeeding an infant requires having access to the child at certain times. Toilet training is easier if parents agree on when and how to handle it. Discuss major changes, such as changing naptime, or changing childcare arrangements, with the other parent. Both parents don't have to do things exactly the same way, but it is easier for children if most things (sleep routines, foods served, mealtimes, etc.) are similar at each home.

### Set reasonable limits and enforce them in a consistent, loving way

Sometimes when parents divorce, they become more or less strict than they were before. Parents may become stricter, setting lots of rules and not allowing any flexibility, because they are having a harder time managing their child's behavior. Other parents may become less strict, allowing their child to do things they wouldn't normally allow because they feel bad about the divorce. They want to "make up" for the divorce by allowing their child more freedom or buying their child more things. Parents may also become more permissive following a divorce because they are too preoccupied with their own concerns to closely monitor their children.

Children benefit the most when their parents find a balance between being too strict and being too permissive. Infants are too young for rules. They need to be physically removed from dangerous situations, or distracted when they are doing something they shouldn't do. Toddlers need clear, simple rules that are consistently enforced in a calm and positive way, for example, "Color on the paper, not the wall," or "Hitting hurts people. You may hit the pillow instead." Allowing toddlers to choose between two appropriate options helps to avoid constant struggles. For example, "Do you want graham crackers or a banana for your snack today?"

### **Communicate with other caregivers**

Be sure to keep other caregivers (relatives, babysitters, childcare providers) updated about family changes. They need to know what is going on in order to understand the child's behavior. For example, many children may act differently following a visit with a parent who doesn't live in the home, or on the day they transition from one parent's home to the other parent's home. Other caregivers may notice behavioral changes that you don't notice. Also, childcare providers can be a good source of support and advice about parenting. However, it is important to avoid putting other caregivers in the middle of your relationship with your former spouse. Avoid asking them to relay messages to your former spouse or asking them questions about your former spouse.

## **Summary**

Divorce is stressful and confusing for infants and toddlers. They are affected by changes in their parents' feelings and behavior, and changes in contact with each parent. Over time most children adjust well to their parents' divorce.

The most important thing you can do is to continue to nurture your child and provide structure for him or her.

Ideally both parents will remain in the child's life, and contact with each parent will be frequent without long separations. Most importantly, infants and toddlers need to know that their parents still love them, that they will be taken care of, and that their familiar routines will generally be the same.

## **Reducing the stress of divorce for infants and toddlers**

Notice signs of stress in your child

- More crying or tantrums
- Loss of appetite or other digestive disturbances
- Changes in sleep patterns: difficulty getting to sleep or sleeping through the night
- Behavior changes: quieter or withdrawn; fussier; more kicking, hitting or biting; more difficulty separating; following directions less often
- Babyish behavior: thumb sucking or loss of bladder or bowel control. These behaviors usually go away in time.
- Physical symptoms: tummy-aches or headaches

These behaviors can be normal behaviors for toddlers. What's important is to look for behaviors that are unusual for your child. Talk to your pediatrician first if you notice signs of stress. If there is not a physical problem, your pediatrician may know where to go for more information. See the Resources section at the end of this guide for more places to look for help.

### **Provide reassurance surrounding transitions**

All children respond to transitions differently. Some easily adjust to frequent transitions between homes, but others have a harder time. Some infants and toddlers become very upset by separation from a parent, but others do not. Many young children show signs of stress when they make frequent transitions between homes. Most young children need a lot of reassurance before and after transitions. Give your child enough time to say good-bye to you and to warm up to the other parent. Send your child's favorite toys or blanket with the child when he or she goes to the other parent's house. Allow

young children to have a photograph of the other parent and to make phone calls to the other parent. This reminds them that the other parent is still there and still loves them.

### **Maintain consistent routines**

Having consistent routines (having generally the same mealtimes, naptimes, bathtimes and bedtimes each day) is important for young children, because it helps them to feel secure. The world is a confusing place for infants and toddlers. Consistent daily routines help them know what is going to happen next. Try to continue old family rituals that your child is used to, for example, going to the park on Saturday afternoon. It is also important to create new rituals, especially if a new adult becomes a regular part of family life. Starting new rituals that include a new partner helps build a strong stepfamily.

## **Parent-child attachment relationships and divorce**

In the second half of the first year of life, infants become strongly attached to the people who care for them. How does divorce affect the child's attachment relationship with each parent? Infants and toddlers can have secure attachments with both parents even though both parents don't live in the home. You can help your infant develop a secure attachment in several ways:

- Respond to your child's needs in predictable, sensitive and affectionate ways. This is the most important thing you can do to help your child form a secure attachment. When you respond quickly to your infant's needs — by picking your infant up when he or she wants to be held, feeding when he or she is hungry, etc. — your infant learns to trust you and forms a secure attachment. Having a secure attachment to you fosters good social relationships and healthy emotional development. Also, when you respond quickly to your infant's cries, your infant will cry less later on.
- Give your child enough time with each parent on a regular basis. It is best if infants and toddlers can see both parents often. Frequent contact helps infants and toddlers remember both parents and develop attachment relationships with both parents. However, it is not always possible for children to see both of their parents often. In some cases, such as when a parent is abusive or neglecting, it is not best for children to see a parent. When children can't see both of their parents, a friend or relative can help with some of the things that the other parent would do. For example, a friend or relative can be a source of security for the child. Infants can form secure attachments with adults other than their parents. Also, a friend or relative can play with and talk to the child, which helps the child learn.
- Work together to help your child develop a secure relationship with each parent. When parents cooperate and have less conflict, their child is more likely to develop secure attachment relationships with each parent. Even infants and toddlers are affected by conflict between their parents. They don't understand what the conflicts are about, but they do pick up on the negative emotions. Infants and toddlers are likely to feel scared and confused when their parents fight in front of them. It is best to discuss issues with your child's other parent when your child is not around and cannot hear the discussion.
- Allow your child time to get used to new adults. It is normal for infants and toddlers to be fearful or anxious around people they don't know well. Allow your child time to get used to new people. It helps young children to see their parent acting warmly and positively toward the new adult. They learn to trust adults who their parents trust. If an infant doesn't want to be held by someone, don't force the infant to be held by that person. Wait until the infant feels comfortable and trusts the person. Toddlers often feel more comfortable when adults get down on their level, so kneeling or sitting when you talk to the child can help. Watching a toddler play for a while, then casually joining in the toddler's play, or talking about the play can help break the ice.

## **Encourage infants and toddlers to express feelings**

Young children often express their feelings through play or artwork, instead of talking about them. You can provide your child with play materials that may help him or her express feelings. Suggested materials for toddlers are: playdoh or clay, art supplies, puppets, dolls, dollhouse and furniture, stuffed animals, and dress-up clothes. Watch your children playing and notice themes that seem related to

family changes, for example, pretending to pack a suitcase and move away. Try to avoid correcting your child's play or drawings or asking direct questions. Children are more likely to open up when adults watch them, wait until the child is ready to talk, and make indirect comments, like "I wonder why your doll is sad."

Reading short, simple books with your older infant or toddler can help your child express feelings and learn language. Books can be a good starting point for talking with young children about their feelings. For example, after reading a book, you can begin with questions or comments about the story such as, "Those baby owls look very sad. Why do you think they're so sad?" Then move to questions about your child's feelings, for example, "What makes you feel sad?" or "I bet they think their mommy's not coming back. Do you think that sometimes?" Books that address the topics of feelings, families and separation are especially appropriate for this age group. Some recommended books for infants and toddlers are:

- *Guess How Much I Love You!* Sam McBratney and Anita Jeram (1994). Candlewick Press. A warm story about a father rabbit's boundless love for his baby bunny.
- *Owl Babies*. Martin Waddell and Patrick Benson (1996). Candlewick Press. In this book, three baby owls find their mother gone, wonder where she is, and are reassured when she returns. This is a comforting story for children who are having problems with separation anxiety.
- *I Love You All the Time*. Jessica Hirschman, Jennifer Cole, and Bonnie Bright (2000). Cookie Bear Press, Inc. This story reminds children that their parents and other family members love them no matter where they live or how busy they are.
- *Baby Faces*. Margaret Miller (1998). Little Simon. Features color photographs that capture the moods and expressions of babies of diverse ethnic backgrounds.
- *How are You Peeling: Foods with Moods*. Saxton Freymann and Joost Elffers (1999). Arther A. Levine Books. This funny, clever book features brightly colored photographs of vegetables and fruits that appear to have facial expressions.

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