

12 Things Kids Think About Divorce But Are Too Afraid To Say

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Divorce can really suck. Two people, at one time so in love they committed to spend the rest of their lives together, find themselves communicating through lawyers and dividing assets and possessions so they can start their lives over again — on their own. But for families with children, there's a whole other layer of complication and planning, and too often kids don't have a voice in what's happening. The only measure of control kids may have (at certain ages and in some states/countries) is choosing which parent's house they would like to live in. But that's just geography. What about the feelings that accompany a house torn apart, and their unspoken expectations of a life lived with a whole family?

The most vivid and painful memories many kids from divorced families have of early childhood aren't of playground scuffles, skinned knees or getting in trouble. Instead, they relive scenes from their parents' divorce. Kids of all ages — some barely aware of their own roles in the world — are acutely aware of events, situations and actions in families divided.

After working with hundreds of families — and observing the behavior of kids as they struggled through the breakdown of their families — here are the top 12 things kids think about divorce, but don't have the world experience to say directly. If they could find the words or the courage, this is what kids wish they could tell their divorcing parents:

1. You got divorced, not me. I know you hate everything about “your ex”, but your ex is still my other parent, and I still love both of you. Please stop talking badly about each other to me or in front of me; it just makes me disrespect you. Don’t gossip with your friends and family about them when I’m around. It makes me feel like crap and you look like a jerk.

2. I really don’t care which one of you gets the car, the timeshare, or Nana’s ashtray collection, so stop telling me about how pissed you are about it and how you feel it’s “unfair”. When you start putting all your energy into material things, you make me think that’s all you care about. Honestly, you should be more angry about losing our family than you are about losing your gym membership.

3. I trust you to protect me from bullies or people who would hurt me. I may need you to shield me right now from the stupid things other people say to me. I don’t have all the right answers, and my feelings get hurt really easily, so please stand up for me. Also, it’s not ok to let your newest “squeeze” discipline me. They don’t know me well enough to scold or even correct me. They have no idea what I am going through, and I lose trust for you when you let them push me around or hurt me — even if it’s unintentional.

4. When you’re talking to each other about visitation, please don’t talk about me like a project that needs to be “managed”. If it’s your weekend to spend time with me, consider the fact that I may really be excited to spend time with you before you let me overhear you say things like, “I have a date. Can’t you just keep her and I’ll cover your weekend?” And when it comes to big events, keep in mind that I have family that I love on both sides. So how about instead of letting a judge decide who I get to see on the holidays — ask me what I want.

5. Don’t use your failed marriage and bitterness toward the opposite sex as your reference when you lecture me about my friendships and relationships. I’m too young to bear your wounds. My friends are my escape from all the stress your divorce is creating, so you may want to not talk badly about them right now, that will just make me rebel against you more.

6. When you start dating again, don’t assume that I am going to love every person you bring home. I have my own opinions, and just because you like them doesn’t mean I’m going to automatically hit it off with someone you’re dating. Remember, you have a different set of criteria for this relationship than I do. Your new “friend” is not my friend, so maybe I don’t want to be nice to them. As a matter of fact, I might fight with them on purpose because I want you take sides — my side. If I’m getting upset please remember that I may be a kid, but I still have feelings. It might be time for us to spend some quality time together — just us.

7. Don’t insult or make fun of the gifts and things I receive from my other parent or the experiences I have with them and their family. This isn’t about you. If you’re jealous, then say that. But insulting the things I like, enjoy and am proud of just because they came from my other parent, only makes you look like a huge, petty brat. It also makes me think twice about sharing new things with you.

8. Quit telling me I’m “being dramatic” about what’s happening. Don’t dismiss my emotions. I’m

allowed to be sad/angry/disappointed/depressed over the divorce of my parents. The family I knew for the whole of my life is ending, and I am scared to death. And from my perspective, you simply stopped loving someone who made you angry, so how long will it be before I do something to make you stop loving me? And on that note, now that I have realized your love has limits, be prepared for me to test those limits almost daily.

9. I would really appreciate it if the two of you could stop acting like children and come up with a plan that allows you to be in the same space at the same time without being mean to each other. For example: my birthday, sports events, recitals, concerts, and basically any time my other family, friends, coaches or teachers are around. If you could manage to put your own selfish crap aside and be civil with each other every once in a while, that would be great for everyone.

10. Please get on the same page when it comes to values, rules and discipline. When — out of spite for each other — you let me get away with stuff that even I know is wrong, you confuse and frustrate me. You teach me how to manipulate people and pit you against each other to get what I want. It is then that I stop taking either of you seriously. Just because you stopped being married, doesn't mean you stopped being parents. I need you to teach me how to resolve conflict, not create it.

11. Please recognize that there are some things that my other parent is better at than you ... and that's OK! I won't think less of you if you let Dad teach me how to catch a ball or Mom show me how to drive. I need to learn from both of you. When you take those experiences away, I can see right through you. I know you want to be able to do this whole parenting thing on your own, but I don't want you to! I like making both my parents happy. I love seeing you smile when I do something you've taught me, and it makes me very happy when you compliment each other by saying things like, "You should ask your (other parent), they're really good at that." When you allow me to learn from and value both of my parents, that teaches me to appreciate the gifts in others and to ask for help when I need it.

12. When I do something to make you mad, don't compare me to the person you divorced. "You're a slob just like your father!" or "You whine and complain like your mother!" are statements that insult me, not the person you divorced. Remember, you left that person. You removed them from your life because of the very things you are identifying in me. Saying that you see things in me that make you think of the things you despise in them makes me feel unlovable and self-conscious — and it destroys my already damaged self esteem. If you want me to clean up after myself or speak more respectfully, then show me how, or make a rule, or talk about it. Just stop putting in my head that my actions are just as offensive to you as the person you divorced.

Divorce isn't pretty or upbeat, but it's also not a time to shut down. When kids are involved, it becomes necessary to open a door for conversation and realization of what your child(ren) are going through — and what they desperately need from both parents. It may be an "adult" situation, but the kids are very aware of what's going on. Be there for them.