

# Helping Infants and Toddlers Adjust to Divorce

Infants and toddlers may seem too young to understand what is happening during a divorce, but they can still be affected by stressful events. During their first three years of life, children grow quickly, become mobile, learn language, begin to understand how the world works and form social relationships. Environmental changes such as parental divorce can affect a child's development, but parents have the power to help their children adjust to family changes.

## Young infants (birth to 8 months)

Infants do not understand divorce, but they pick up on changes in their parents' feelings and behavior. Following a divorce, parents might become temporarily depressed, have less energy and be less responsive to their infant. Young infants do not have much control over their emotions, which are influenced by their parents' feelings. When a parent acts worried or sad, their infant is likely to mirror those feelings. Infants cannot tell adults how they feel, so adults must interpret infants' behavior. When their parents are upset, infants might be fussier and more difficult to comfort or seem uninterested in people or things.

Until about 4 to 6 months of age, infants don't understand that things or people they can't see still exist; out of sight, out of mind. Even when infants learn this, they don't remember things for long. Infants have difficulty remembering and forming close bonds with parents they do not see often.

Between 6 and 8 months of age, infants develop stranger anxiety, or feelings of fear or anxiety around unfamiliar people. After divorce, an infant might see one parent less often, which could lead to stranger anxiety around that parent. Infants are more likely to feel comfortable around both parents if they have frequent contact with both parents following divorce.

## FOCUS on Kids

*This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children. We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.*

## Older infants (8 months to 18 months)

Many infants begin to show separation distress between 8 and 12 months of age. Infants might cry, scream or cling when a parent is leaving. Infants have trouble being separated from a parent for long periods of time, such as overnight.

Separation can be hard for infants because they have strong feelings for the parent. They want to be with the parent all the time and don't understand why they can't.

Babies may prefer one parent to the other; typically the parent who cares for them most often. 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 divorce and one parent drops out of the infant's life. If this happens, your child won't remember the other parent but will probably become curious about them. Provide short, simple and honest answers to your child's questions. If your child asks where an absent parent is, tell them "Daddy's at his house." Avoid saying negative things about the other parent and reassure your child that the other parent's absence is not their fault. Reassure your child that you will always love and take care of them. Help your child form close relationships with other adults who can be supportive role models.

## Parent-child attachment relationships

Infants 6 to 12 months of age usually become strongly attached to the people who care for them. They need to feel cared for as they learn to develop trust and love. Infants and toddlers can have secure attachments with both parents, despite parents not living together. Having a secure attachment fosters good social relationships and healthy emotional development. You can help your infant develop a secure attachment.

Responding to your child's needs in predictable, sensitive and affectionate ways is the best way to help your child form a secure attachment. When you respond quickly to your infant's needs — by picking them up when they want to be held and feeding them when they are hungry — your infant learns to trust you.

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Give your child enough time with each parent on a regular basis. Frequent contact helps infants and toddlers remember both parents and develop attachment relationships, so give your child enough time with each parent. However, sometimes children cannot regularly see both of their parents. In some cases, such as when a parent is abusive or neglectful, children should not see that parent. When children can't see both parents, a friend or relative can help fill some of the roles of an absent parent and be a source of security for the child. Infants can form secure attachments with adults who aren't their parents.

Work together to help your child develop a secure relationship with each parent. When parents cooperate and minimize conflict, their child is more likely to develop secure attachment relationships with each parent. Even infants and toddlers are affected by conflict. They don't understand what conflicts are about but do pick up on negative emotions. Infants and toddlers are more likely to feel scared and confused when their parents fight in front of them. Instead, discuss issues with your child's other parent when your child is not around and cannot hear the discussion.

Give your child time to get used to new adults. Infants and toddlers tend to be fearful or anxious around people they don't know well. Young children learn to trust adults when they see their parent acting warmly and positively toward new people. If an infant doesn't want to be held by someone, don't force the issue. 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. Help break the ice by watching the child play for a while, then casually joining their play or talking about the play.

## Toddlers (18 months to 3 years)

### **Communication**

Toddlers can use language to express thoughts and feelings. Although toddlers are learning to use language, there are still many things they don't understand. In a divorce, they understand that one parent is not living at home but do not understand why. They also do not understand time. For example, a toddler might ask, "When is Daddy coming?" and the parent says, "You will see Daddy on Thursday." The child may ask the same question two hours later because they don't understand how long it is until Thursday. Toddlers will often repeatedly ask the same questions, which can be frustrating for parents. You should still answer your toddler's questions, but 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 would be like to be in another country where you don't speak the language and how difficult it would be to get people to understand your thoughts and feelings. Having an adult nearby who knows them well, understands their thoughts and feelings and helps them express those thoughts and feelings makes a big difference for a toddler.

### **Thoughts and feelings**

Toddlers have difficulty seeing things from another person's perspective, so they think about things in relation to themselves. When parents divorce, toddlers are most concerned with how their own needs will be met. Toddlers worry about who will fix their dinner or tuck them in at night, whether the parent they live with is also going to leave and if their parents still love them.

Toddlers become more aware of others' feelings and learn to express their own feelings with words and through play. Toddlers can become more aggressive or fearful when their parents divorce. Frequent emotional shifts are common for toddlers; one minute they play happily and are upset a few minutes later. It is hard for toddlers to manage strong feelings like sadness or anger. They might miss the absent parent or be angry about that parent's absence. Toddlers need to know it is acceptable to have these feelings.

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

Young children often express their feelings through play or artwork, rather than talking about them. You can provide your child with play materials that may help them express their feelings. Suggested materials for toddlers include play dough or clay, art supplies, puppets, dolls, dollhouses, stuffed animals and dress-up clothes. Watch your children playing and note themes that might be related to family changes, such as pretending to pack a suitcase and move away. Avoid asking direct questions about or correcting your child's play or drawings. Children are more likely to open up when adults watch them, so wait until they are ready to talk and make indirect comments, such as "I wonder why your doll is sad."

Reading short, simple books with your older infant or toddler can help them 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, 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, such as "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 helpful for this age group. These books are recommended for infants and toddlers:

- **Mommy Loves Her Bunny** — The story of mother animals, such as rabbits, ducks and mice, who love their babies unconditionally.
- **Daddy All Day Long** — A comforting tale of reassurance between a father pig and piglet as the piglet learns to express how much he loves his daddy.
- **I Love You All Day Long** — This uplifting book reminds children that their parents' love is with them all day long wherever they are.
- **When I Feel Sad** — This story helps young children understand their moods and express their emotions during difficult times.

- **Baby Faces** — This book helps babies recognize facial expressions.
- **The Feelings Book** — This book features bright, colorful illustrations about different types of feelings expressed by young children.

## **Behavior**

Toddlers are more independent than infants, and they exert this independence by frequently saying “No” to adult requests or testing limits. Toddlers’ negative behavior and acting out might increase during the divorce process. Toddlers need clear, consistent rules that are enforced in a loving way. Although they may seem independent, toddlers need constant supervision to keep them safe.

Stress can cause infants and toddlers to alter their behavior, often in negative ways. Keep an eye out for these signs of stress in your child:

- More crying or tantrums
- Digestive disturbances, such as loss of appetite
- Changes in sleep patterns, such as difficulty getting to sleep or sleeping through the night or frequent nightmares
- Behavior changes, such as acting quieter, fussier or more withdrawn; more kicking, hitting or biting; more difficulty separating from parents; more refusal to follow directions
- Babyish behavior, such as thumb sucking, loss of bladder or bowel control, or demanding to be fed instead of feeding themselves — these behaviors usually go away in time
- Physical symptoms, such as stomach aches or headaches

These behaviors can be normal behaviors for toddlers, so 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 *Additional information* section at the end of this guide for information on where to go to find more help.

## **Transitioning between households**

Children respond to transitions differently. Some easily adjust to frequent transitions between homes, but others have a harder time. Some infants and toddlers get upset when separated from a parent, but others cope and have no trouble handling separation.

Many young children show signs of stress when they make frequent transitions between homes. They need child-friendly homes and reassurance from their parents before and after transitions, so show them you understand their distress. Give your child enough time to say goodbye and warm up to the other parent or caregiver so parent and child adjust without feeling rushed or hurried. You should also send your child’s favorite toys or blanket with them when they go to the other parent’s house. Give young children a photograph of the other parent and allow them

to stay in contact with each other. This reminds them that the other parent is still there and still loves them.

## **Maintain consistent routines**

Having routines — such as consistent times for meals, naps, baths and sleep each day — helps children feel secure. The world is a confusing place for infants and toddlers, and consistent daily routines help them know what is going to happen next. Try to continue old family rituals, such as going to the park on Saturday afternoon, and create new ones, 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.

## **Communicate with your child’s other parent**

Some co-parents stay in touch daily via phone, text or email, and others are in less frequent contact. To promote an effective co-parenting arrangement, parents should agree on a method that works for both of them.

Some parenting issues require communication and coordination between parents if their children divide time between households. For example, breast-feeding requires access to the child at certain times. Toilet training is easier if parents agree on when and how to handle it. Discuss major changes with the other parent, such as changing nap time or childcare arrangements. Parents don’t have to do things exactly the same way, but it is easier for children if most routines are similar in each home.

Research shows that children display fewer distressing symptoms when parents do not use their child as leverage. Using threats or bargaining to get what you want or because you are angry with the other parent might cause greater conflict and create more stress for the child. Instead, co-parents should avoid communicating in front of the child. Approach speaking with the other parent calmly and clearly, rather than starting on the defensive. Listen patiently when not speaking to demonstrate your understanding and respect for what the other parent has to say. Furthermore, maintain a positive attitude and focus only on the topic of co-parenting.

Children trust their parents to handle stress for them and to cooperate for their well-being. Doing so will only help infants and toddlers adjust better to the divorce.

## **Set reasonable limits**

Sometimes when parents divorce, they become more or less strict than they were before. Parents may become stricter, setting lots of rules and being inflexible because they have a harder time managing their child’s behavior. Other parents might become more lax, allowing their child to do things they otherwise wouldn’t because they feel guilty about the divorce or are too preoccupied with their own concerns. They might try to make up for the divorce by allowing their child more freedom or buying their child more things.

Children benefit when their parents find a balance between being too strict and being too permissive. Infants are too young for rules, so they need to be physically

removed from dangerous situations or distracted when they do something they shouldn't. Toddlers need clear, simple rules that are consistently enforced in a calm and positive way, such as "Color on the paper, not the wall." Allowing toddlers to choose between two options helps to avoid constant struggles. Parents must be clear to toddlers about what will happen if they do not obey rules.

### **Communicate with other caregivers**

Keep other caregivers — such as relatives, babysitters and childcare providers — up-to-date on family changes. They need to know what is going on to understand the child's behavior. For example, children might act differently following a visit with the other parent or on the day they transition from one parent's house to another. Other caregivers might notice behavioral changes.

Childcare providers can be a good source of support and advice about parenting, but avoid putting other caregivers in the middle of your relationship with your former spouse.

### **Take care of yourself**

Caring for infants and toddlers during a divorce can be highly stressful and, at times, overwhelming for parents. Parents might lose sleep, forget to eat and become depressed or frequently distressed. Children, especially at such a young age, rely heavily on their parents to make good decisions. To take care of children, parents must first take care of themselves. Here are some self-care tips for divorced or separated parents with an infant or toddler:

- Get adequate sleep and manage your time; sleep when the child sleeps, especially during nap time.
- Exercise and maintain a healthy diet.
- Engage in personal hygiene.
- Practice relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises and lying down.
- Cooperatively communicate with the other parent on a regular basis.

Hungry, angry, lonely or tired, or HALT, is a tool that helps to remind parents to be more patient and sensitive when caring for their child. These feelings can make parents and children more likely to make to poor behavioral decision-making. You can prevent some of these problems by planning for potential problems ahead of time. Hunger can cause parents to be less attentive or children to act out more, so pack healthy snacks and drinks for running errands or traveling. Children will occasionally get upset, so give them time to deal with their anger. Help them understand expectations of appropriate behavior. Set aside time to bond with your child, such as by reading to them before bed. Bonding helps children feel loved and secure. Furthermore, figure out an appropriate sleep schedule for your child to ensure they get a sufficient amount of sleep.

## **Conclusion**

Divorce is confusing for infants and toddlers, who pick up on changes in emotions and contact with each parent.

Ideally, both parents remain in the child's life and contact with each parent is frequent without long separations. The most important thing you can do is to continue to nurture your child and provide them with structure.

## **Additional information**

Center for Divorce Education. <https://online.divorce-education.com>

Helpguide. [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/quick\\_stress\\_relief.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/quick_stress_relief.htm)

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## **Related MU Extension Publications**

- GH6129 *Parenting: Success Requires a Team Effort*
- GH6602 *Activities for Helping Children Deal with Divorce*
- GH6613 *Helping Preschoolers and Elementary-Age Children Adjust to Divorce*