



## THE FAMILY TREE

### Seven Survivor Tips To Help Your Child Come Through Divorce

At The Family Tree, we know that even the most confident individuals among us feel scared and angry in the face of divorce. But, we also know that most adults are capable of sorting through these emotions and getting on with their lives relatively soon after the divorce is final - usually with the fervent hope of finding someone else to love down the road. Their children, on the other hand, do not bounce back as easily. Often feeling that their secure and dependable world is literally falling apart, they may become openly defiant, quietly withdrawn, or terribly sad. Schoolwork may suffer, and changes in eating and sleeping patterns are common. Without loving and understanding parents to help put things back into perspective, they often carry these scars into their adult relationships.

With this in mind, we have polled our staff of family experts to create a list of helpful strategies you can use to foster healthier outcomes for children going through the heartbreak of divorce.

1. **Talk about what is going on.** As soon as you and your spouse decide to end the marriage, find time for both of you to sit down with the kids and explain what divorce means, and how it will change their lives. Give them permission to ask questions and express their feelings. But reassure them calmly and firmly that the divorce is final, and they bear no responsibility for it. Make sure your children know there are no secrets and that they can talk about the divorce openly with friends, teachers, and other family members. If your kids are little – preschool and early elementary – storybooks about imaginary friends going through divorce are a great way to open the discussion.
2. **Keep in touch.** Set a regular time each week to check in with your children. Prepare a favorite meal, or rent a good movie, as a way to set the stage for an honest, two-way exchange. Invite them to share their innermost feelings, and listen calmly and patiently when they do, even if it's hard for you to hear what they have to say. And, most importantly, let them know they can still count on both of their parents to be strong and supportive, no matter what the issues are.
3. **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** When things get tough, as they inevitably do from time to time, build your support system. Seek help from professionals,

grandparents, favorite aunts, teachers, or trusted family friends. Make sure that everyone who is significant in your child's life knows what is going on, and how he/she can best support all of you. Try to locate a children's support group in your area. These groups, under the guidance of a trained adult facilitator offer children a safe – and confidential – space, in which to speak openly with one another about painful emotions

4. **Remember that your child is not a party to the divorce action.** Even though you may have fallen out of love with each other, your children still love you both, “warts and all.” So, be careful not to put any of them, wittingly or unwittingly, in the middle. Never ask them to take sides, listen to one of you berate the other, or deliver messages to the other camp. That's what you are paying your attorneys to do.
5. **Keep change to a minimum.** Make every effort to maintain such household routines as chores, family meals, and bedtimes. Celebrate birthdays, holidays, and other special events as usual, and try to keep the family home intact as long as possible, so that your kids can continue going to the same schools and playing with the same friends. Discipline calmly, but firmly, even under pressure. And do not bring dates home until your children tell you they feel comfortable with your new, single lifestyle.
6. **Don't use custody and visitation as a weapon.** Except in cases where safety is an issue, children should always be allowed ample time with both parents. Although it may be a hassle, especially in the beginning when emotions are raw, shared custody and open-ended visitation are healthy and positive solutions for raising kids between two households. Find ways to share the responsibilities of active parenting (for example, he carools one week to soccer practice, you take the next week). Above all, honor and support the time your children spend with each of you, and make it comfortable for them to go back and forth whenever they wish.
7. **And last, but not least, remember that open battles waged over children always end up at the mercy of an impartial court.** We are often reminded of the instructions a very wise and experienced family court judge gave divorcing parents, after patiently hearing two days of heated arguments in a nasty custody and visitation battle. “I assume you both love your daughter, and want what is best for her,” he said. Both parents nodded yes, and waited expectantly for the next question. After a few moments of careful and studied reflection, the judge looked down again from his bench, and issued his decision, in a clearly exasperated voice, “Well, **don't** love your child. Heck, I don't even know her. And yet you are asking me to make crucial decisions that will probably affect her for the rest of her life. Now, I'm going to take a three-hour recess, and when we come back, I expect you both to have reached an arrangement that shows me just how much you really do love her.” Needless to say, they both returned at the appointed time, with their attorneys in tow, and a thoughtful and workable agreement in hand.

Divorce is a devastating process that will always be difficult for a child because it breaks up

the home, the child's place of security, and separates the two people most important in his/her life. Children cannot adjust without help. But when parents work together to "cushion the blow" and present a united love for their child, the adjustment period may be less traumatic and shorter in duration. We believe these tips will help you help your child.