

Back-to-School Tips for Families After a Recent Separation or Divorce

Returning to school after summer vacation can be difficult at the best of times, but it poses additional challenges for children if a separation or divorce occurred over the holidays. Here's advice to help your children answer questions from schoolmates – and how to know when to seek professional help for your child.

By [Diana Shepherd](#)

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Going back to school is always a stressful time for children and parents; some greet it with joyful excitement, while others are anxious and depressed when the summer holidays are over. This is true for all families – but when there has been a separation or divorce over the summer, children can be especially anxious about returning to school. What are they going to tell their friends? Their teachers? If children believe the divorce was their fault – and most children do, until repeated reassurance convinces them they're blameless – they may be experiencing feelings of guilt as well as sadness.

"It is important to alert your child's teacher about a divorce that happened or is pending over the summer, no matter the age of the child," says Dr. Donald Gordon, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the [Center for Divorce Education](#). "Ask the teacher to look for opportunities to show understanding and emotional support if the child shows stress, is distracted, not completing homework or classwork, or acts out." Instead of responding to misbehavior with disciplinary procedures, he advises, parents (and teachers, if possible) should talk to the child privately and ask how he/she is feeling. Then the parent or teacher can do some problem-solving with the child in a discussion rather than laying down the law.

Make a plan with your children about how to answer questions about the separation or divorce. Discuss the fact that they may be facing a lot of questions from curious schoolmates, and let them know that's it's okay to politely

decline to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable. You can coach their children about how to politely deflect intensely personal questions as well as discuss what *would* be appropriate to share with their friends and acquaintances.



"Ask them what they would want their friends and classmates to know about the divorce," says Dr. Gordon. "It is helpful for your kids to be honest about what they are feeling: sad, fearful, confused, scared, worried, angry, relieved, hopeful, etc. Their peers may ask where they will be living, will they move, will they

get to see both parents, which one will they live with most of the time."

Your children may be anxious to know whether they'll still be attending the same school, or whether they'll have to change schools because of a change in residence after the separation or divorce. If the parent with primary physical custody has moved to a new school district, he or she should reassure the kids that they'll still be able to see their old friends – and then make sure to keep that promise.

"Since fear is often the reaction to a family breakup, parents should make heroic efforts to reassure the kids that they will have regular time with each parent that is free from parental conflict," Dr. Gordon emphasizes. "Parents must assure the kids that they can love their other parent, that it is OK to miss the other parent and be excited to see them."

According to experts, it usually takes about a year for children to come to terms with their parents' divorce. This doesn't mean that they are no longer experiencing any feelings of sadness or anger, but they should be coping well with those feelings by the end of the first year after the divorce.

One bad grade or schoolyard scuffle aren't reasons for parents to panic; these incidents may or may not have anything to do with your separation or divorce. Unless a child's adjustment problems are really severe, you should give their kids at least six months to a year to deal with his/her feelings of loss due to the divorce.

However, you should consider seeking professional help if your child becomes uncharacteristically withdrawn, sad, or angry for several months. Warning signs that your child is not coping well with the new family dynamic could include:

- having his/her grades plummet in school
- losing friends – or suddenly hanging out with a new group of troubled kids
- displaying radical changes in behavior, including uncharacteristic, intense anger; lying, cheating, or stealing; playing hooky regularly, or fighting at school
- developing physical symptoms, such as sleep or eating disorders, unexplained stomach or headaches or substance abuse.

Dr. Gordon also advises parents to watch out for crying and grief that does not subside after several weeks – especially if their attention in school is very disrupted. "Aggressive behavior that is not normal for your child may be another sign to get professional help. Professional help should involve the parents and advise them how to reduce their children's distress." Family therapy may help to bring issues affecting the kids into the open for discussion, he adds.

For more information about red flags in a child's behavior after separation or divorce, take a look at: [Warning Signs: Are Your Kids at Risk?](#)