

# Key Parenting Practices through a Divorce or Separation

Parents navigating divorce are often given guidance from a range of sources, including mental health providers, legal professionals, medical practitioners, and well-meaning friends or family. While the intent is often helpful, the volume and variability of advice can lead to confusion and uncertainty. This handout outlines 15 evidence-informed parenting practices designed to promote stability, emotional security, and healthy adjustment for children during the transition of divorce.

## 1. Be an Emotionally Engaged Parent


Children in high-conflict divorces often feel anxious, torn, and overwhelmed—even when they don't show it. Your calm, emotionally attuned presence matters more than perfection. Parents can be preoccupied with their own emotions, so it is important to pay special attention to their engagement with their children.

### Practice Emotion Coaching:

- Notice and name feelings: "You seem upset after coming home—want to talk?"
- Validate instead of fix: "That sounds really hard. It makes sense that you'd feel that way."
- Set limits with care: "It's okay to feel angry. It's not okay to throw things."

### Your child needs to know:

- Their feelings are okay.
- They aren't responsible for managing your feelings.
- You are their emotional anchor.
- You have time for them

 **Remember:** Tell your child that you can hear what they're worried about telling you. You can say something such as, "You can tell me how you feel, even if it's hard. I can handle it."

## 2. Provide Structure, Boundaries, and Warmth


When the family structure is changing, children benefit from predictable routines, clear boundaries, and emotionally warm parenting. This balanced approach is known as authoritative parenting. It provides a sense of security and stability that is especially important during times of transition, such as divorce.

### Do:

- Keep daily routines as consistent as possible.
- Offer choices when appropriate (clothing, meals, weekend plans).
- Maintain rules and expectations in your home, even if they differ from the other parent's.

### Don't:

- Overcompensate out of guilt.
- Avoid setting limits because you're afraid they'll like the other parent more.
- Share your stress or legal battles with your child.


 **Remember:** It is important to focus on your parenting as you can't tell the coparent how to parent, especially in a high-conflict dynamic. Research also demonstrates that one strong parent-child relationship can be a big resilience factor during a high-conflict divorce.

### 3. Protect Your Child From Adult Conflict

Your child should never be pulled into loyalty conflicts, used to carry messages, or asked to choose sides. These dynamics place undue emotional stress on children and can significantly hinder their adjustment. Instead, parents should take responsibility for direct communication and work to protect their child's right to have a safe and supportive relationship with both parents.

#### **Protective Parenting Strategies:**

- Communicate directly with your co-parent—never through your child.
- Avoid comments like “Your mom always...” or “Your dad never...”
- Don't ask your child to report what happened in the other home.
- Respond, don't react. Model calm behavior even when your child is upset, angry, or emotionally split.
- Keep things neutral: “I hope you had a good time.”
- Focus on your home, your parenting, your presence.
- Take care of yourself. Your emotional regulation helps your child feel safe and grounded.
- Let your child love both parents. Support their relationship with the other parent, even if it's hard for you.

 **Tip:** Remember that kids are not mediators, messengers, or therapists. Let them be kids.

### 4. Support Transitions Between Homes


Moving between two households is stressful—even in low-conflict situations. Make transitions as smooth and emotionally safe as possible. Children often need time to adjust emotionally and physically when shifting homes. Predictable routines, warm welcomes, and low-pressure reentry help ease this transition.

#### **Before Transitions:**

- Prepare their bag in advance.
- Keep your tone calm and positive.
- Use a familiar goodbye phrase or comfort object.
- Don't do prolonged goodbyes.
- Talk positively about going

#### **After Transitions:**

- Don't ask them about the other household
- Welcome them back warmly and calmly
- Give them space to settle.
- Reconnect without interrogation.

 **Tip:** Plan a quiet, familiar routine for the first hour after return (favorite dinner, TV show, bath, bedtime story).

## 5. Respond Well to Negative Feedback


It's painful to hear your child say they're mad at you or prefer the other parent. But venting and shifting allegiances are normal coping behaviors. Children may express strong emotions as a way to process confusion, stress, or loyalty binds. Try to respond with steadiness and empathy, rather than defensiveness or correction.

### **Healthy Responses:**

- "Thanks for being honest with me. I still love you."
- "You're allowed to have big feelings. I want to understand."
- "I would love to hear your ideas on how we can do this better."

### **Avoid:**

- Guilt trips: "After everything I do for you..."
- Defensiveness: "You should be respectful to your parents."
- Interrogation: "Did your dad tell you to say that?"
- Proving Yourself: "This is what actually happened..."

 **Tip:** Remember that kids sometimes say what they think the other parent wants to hear. Stay grounded in your own relationship with your child.

## 6. Keep Children Out of Adult Roles


Divorce often places emotional pressure on children to "grow up fast." Don't let them become your confidant, caretaker, or advisor. This can create a dynamic known as parentification, which may lead to long-term emotional strain. Your child needs the freedom to stay in their role as a child, with age-appropriate responsibilities and support.

### **Signs of Parentification:**

- Your child checks on your mood or tries to cheer you up
- They ask about the other parent's behavior or finances
- You feel tempted to explain legal or financial struggles to them

### **Instead, say:**

- "Thanks for caring. You don't have to worry about that. That's my job."
- "It's okay to let me be the parent and for you to just be a kid."
- "You don't have to worry about money, we will always make sure you have what you need."

 **Remember:** Protect their emotional and relational development by not making them your support system.