

# Lakewood Counseling and Career Center

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## **DIVORCE AND YOUR CHILD**

**By Nancy McLean**

About half of the dissolving marriages consist of families with children. This means that in the United States, 40% of all children will experience a parental divorce at some point in their childhood. Once the decision to divorce has been made, it is up to us as parents to minimize the negative impact for our children. Here are some suggestions.

1. Tell your children about the impending separation/divorce. Plan the talk ahead of time and be sure that you and your spouse are both present for the discussion, if at all possible. Children need answers but do not need all the details. Tell them you are divorcing because you were unable to work out your adult problems. Assure them that you will both continue to love them and that you are not divorcing them. Divorce is between adults, not parents and their children. Assure your child that this is not their fault (children, especially young children, often fantasize that it is their fault).
2. Consider your child's age in determining when to tell them. For very young children, telling them 7-10 days before the separation occurs is probably reasonable; telling them too far in advance is confusing and anxiety producing. For adolescents, 4-6 weeks is helpful so that they have time to integrate and adjust to the upcoming change.
3. Provide stability for the children. Try to minimize moves, school changes, etc. Tell children where they will live, where the non-custodial parent will live, how often visits will be, etc. The more children know what is going to happen, the less anxiety they will experience.
4. Do not denigrate or attack your ex-spouse in front of the children. Children define themselves in terms of the parents. If a parent is denigrated (especially same sex parent) the child's self-image and self-esteem will suffer.
5. Avoid arguments and hostility. Research shows that the amount parents argue greatly affects children's adjustment. Children are more affected by the way feelings are handled than the divorce itself.
6. Encourage your child to talk about feelings and to ask questions. The more the child can talk about the divorce and express feelings, the better the adjustment.
7. Seek out resources such as age appropriate books, support groups, therapy, etc. to support you and your children as you navigate this process.