

Transitioning Kids To New Homes

A supportive, inclusive guide for parents



RHODE ISLAND DIVORCE MEDIATION CENTER

when MEETING THE MOMENT *matters*



All parents have concerns about the adjustments their children will face after divorce. New homes, different routines and unfamiliar environments are inevitable aspects of divorce that can be unsettling for children, but there are numerous ways to make these changes easier. Helping children feel safe, secure, and connected to both parents all play a role in how children adapt.

For parents, the emotional shift in thinking from spouses to co-parents is not always easy, and can be particularly difficult if they struggle separating their personal feelings about each other from their roles as parents. As difficult as this shift can be, unified parenting is the distinction between children who thrive after divorce and those who just survive.

Parenting involves sacrifices and setting personal differences aside is perhaps the greatest example of this. Children will thrive when both parents prioritize creating healthy emotional environments, refrain from engaging in conflict in front of their children and have respect for one another as their child's other parent.

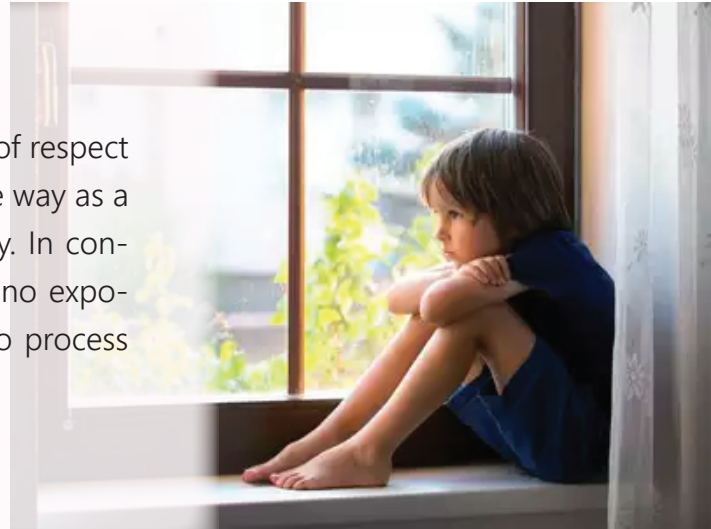
It's true that children are resilient, but regardless of their age resiliency is not a guarantee that they will come through a divorce without trauma or lasting scars. Helping children adjust and thrive during and after a divorce requires effort and planning. With the right support, children can make the transition with minimal or no negative impact - and thrive.

Setting the right tone from the beginning is not only an important step for children, but it also begins the shift parents need to make in their relationship and unify in meeting the needs of their children.

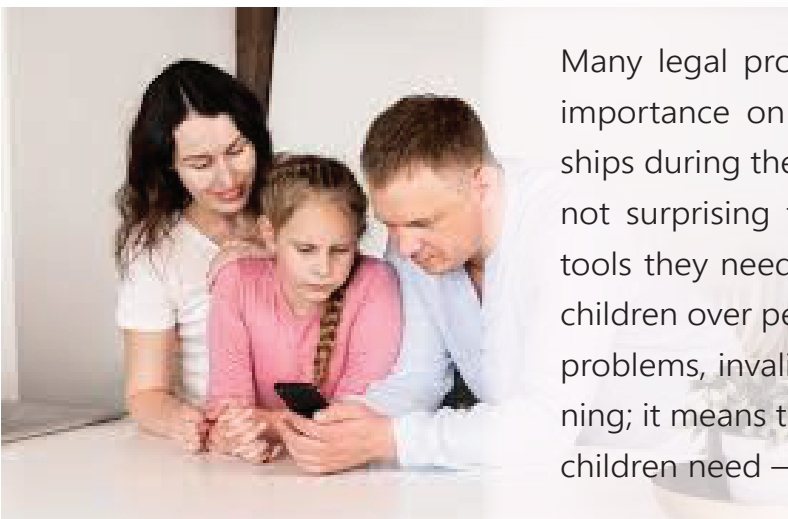
your **FOUNDATION** *is everything*

There are many statistics about the negative impacts of divorce on children, but the belief that divorce itself damages children is the biggest myth.

An environment with on-going conflict, arguments, lack of respect and animosity can negatively impact children in the same way as a divorce when parental behavior is consistently unhealthy. In contrast, when unhealthy behaviors cease or children have no exposure, they experience less emotional turmoil, are able to process the changes, and adapt with far less difficulty.



Aside from concerns about our own futures after divorce, we have a responsibility as parents to provide a soft landing for our children.



Many legal professionals and family courts place little or no importance on the quality of post-divorce parental relationships during the divorce - when it should be the priority. So, it's not surprising that parents go into their divorce lacking the tools they need to properly support their children. Prioritizing children over personal grievances does not minimize a couple's problems, invalidate them, or mean that either of them is winning; it means their problems are kept separate from what their children need – two present, loving and supportive parents.

still **FAMILY,** *just different*

In almost every divorce children will experience the relocation of at least one parent which means they will have a new home also. While this is an adjustment, not all changes are bad; they are just different and require getting used to. Since children take many verbal and non-verbal cues from their parents, the way parents approach new residences will affect their child's level of acceptance, ease of adjustment and comfort in their new surroundings.

A child's emotional safety and security are two of the basic human needs that are most vulnerable when their parents get divorced. Depending on their age, when these needs are not met children can feel a lack of control over their environments, their day-to-day lives, and their futures.

Fear and uncertainty arise in children when they lack information to emotionally ground themselves in what the future looks like. Without this information, they typically draw from the experiences of their peers, whose parents may or may not have had an amicable divorce and assume they will experience the same outcome.

Concerns about changing schools, remaining close to their friends, activities, and their other parent are common.

As easily as these concerns can turn into fear, anger or anxiety, the good news is, with a little parental effort they can also be minimized or avoided.

In most cases, children should only be told about a divorce once parents have worked out which of them will be relocating or if both will be relocating, parenting schedules & responsibilities, and a general location of the new home(s) in proximity to the other parent, the child's school, friends and activities. This information can be shared, age-appropriately, with children to provide a picture they can relate to without using their friend's experiences as a blueprint for their own.

There are many ways to make children feel secure about the upcoming changes in their lives and set them up for success.



include

YOUR CHILDREN

in the process

Assuming parents have told their children about the divorce - and they are old enough, accompanying their parent when looking for a new home can replace fear of the unknown with familiarity

When children are included in the home search, they have a sense of inclusion about where they will be spending part of their time in the future. To improve on this, provided there is no conflict between parents, children also benefit when both parents visit the new home with their children.

This demonstrates that their family is still connected even though the day-to-day dynamic will change. Children who experience parents taking an interest in their other parent's new home and continuing to interact and support one another feel safer and more assured that both parents will be there for them after the divorce.



create

NEW ENVIRONMENTS

together



Making a child's personal space comfortable is important to help them settle in and feel more comfortable in a new home. Putting a new bedroom together as a family can be a fun and exciting experience for younger children and meaningful for those who are older.

Whether it's deciding on furniture, paint color or decor, including the other parent sends the message that both parents care about their child and regardless of which home the child is in. If parents will be sharing any expenses for the child's needs, those conversations should be had privately between parents ahead of time. When setting up the environment in a second home for infants, the same necessities should be mirrored as closely as possible at the homes of both parents.

The extent to which parents collaborate should be in line with their relationship and will likely be destabilizing rather than productive for children if there is conflict between parents.

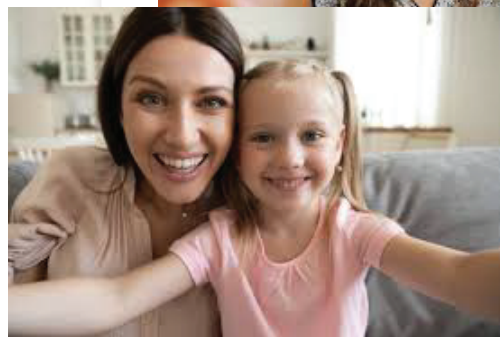
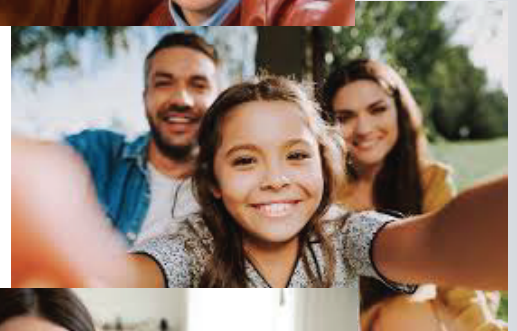
create **SAFE TO LOVE** *zones*

An environment where children are able to openly express love for their other parent in both homes is not only important to prevent emotional stress or trauma, it is the child's right. Children should also always feel safe talking about their other parent and experiences with that parent without fear of criticism or disapproval.

Photos and meaningful items of the other parent in their bedrooms at both homes is another way to help children adjust to their new surroundings and can help with separation anxiety.

During the first few months of a new home transition, it's not uncommon for some children to experience anxiety when away from either parent. Some ways to counteract this anxiety include regular calls or face-time with the other parent, and gradually increasing the amount of time or overnights the child spends at the new home until they are comfortable with the time sharing schedule agreed upon during the divorce.

It is important for parents to be patient, understanding and facilitate daily contact between the child and their other parent. Consistency between parents is also important for success..



new
TRADITIONS
are important



For children old enough to understand celebrations and special days, the traditions they experienced as a family will change after a divorce and can create feelings of sadness or loss.

Even if divorced families continue to spend time together on special days and holidays it's important to create new traditions that children share individually with each parent.



New traditions and activities represent togetherness and give children something special to look forward to with each parent. These new traditions also create memories and maintain the bond a child has with each parent.

When children share the time they spend with each parent on holidays and special days, it can reduce the child's anxiety, sense of loss, or feelings of guilt that either parent is being left out.



Parents should also ensure that children continue to participate in extended family gatherings, traditions and special day celebrations similarly to before the divorce.

parental

FLEXIBILITY

is a must



Regardless of how much parents plan and juggle schedules to accommodate their children, how they will adjust to the transitions of divorce is not predictable. Age, level of maturity, emotional health, the presence of disabilities, where they are in the grieving process, and the quality of the relationship between their parents all factor in to their process.

When a divorce coincides with another big event like starting or changing schools, the loss of a family member or pet for example, these events can hinder or prolong the child's ability to process everything going on in the lives.

It's important for parents to realize that there is no perfect way or exact time frame for children to fully acclimate to their new normal - every child adjusts in their own way and in their own time. These transitions are a time that require love, support, and patience so children receive the emotional safety they need to adjust.

Good communication is a must between parents for sharing how their children are doing at each home, what may need to be adjusted, or if the child would benefit from counseling or academic assistance.

always **COMMUNICATE** *for them*

It's not uncommon for children to align with one parent during or after a divorce, and this can be frustrating for both parents. While there are numerous reasons children do this, parents can minimize the problems and potential conflict this behavior creates through periodic age appropriate family discussions.

Once children are told about a divorce it takes time for them to process what is happening, even if they knew the divorce was coming. They must also go through the grieving process, just like adults, which can spark unpredictable behaviors.



Family meetings are a good way for children and parents to communicate effectively to, share feelings, address concerns, avoid misunderstandings, and provide updates about the family's transition. This time can also prevent children from approaching parents separately with difficult or sensitive questions that should be addressed by parents together. Keeping communication age appropriate and open prevents children from pitting parents against each other, trying to manipulate situations or outcomes and directing blame at either parent.