

# Helping Your Teen Adjust to Divorce

*(by Gary Gilles, LCPC, from mentalhelp.net)*

## Further recommended reading:

Article: [What Children Experience \(And How To Help\)](#) by Simon J. Dahlman from FocusOnTheFamily.com

Article: [To the Sons and Daughters of Divorce](#) by Paul Maxwell from DesiringGod.org

Divorce is never easy for a child regardless of their age, but the teen years pose special challenges. Adolescence is already a time of turmoil. The average teenager is trying to cope with body changes, hormones, peer pressures, the opposite sex, acne, and school work. Add the break-up of the family to that mix and their world can feel like it is crumbling. Their struggles are often compounded by a reluctance to talk about their feelings. If they do open up they may demand answers to difficult questions surrounding the divorce that you're not ready to divulge. Amid this whirlwind of confusion it might be tempting to treat your teen as an adult, capable of solving his or her own problems. But in reality your teen desperately needs you during this time of transition.

## Teenage typhoon

Your teen looks to you for stability and guidance amid the turbulent storms of adolescence. The ending of a marriage turns a normal adolescent storm into a typhoon and calls into question whether anyone will be there to help him navigate these treacherous waters. But safe passage for your teenager depends a great deal on the way you handle the divorce and the type of encouragement you offer your teen.

Healthy adolescent adjustment to divorce requires you and your teenager to work together. Your job is to step into their shoes; see your divorce from their perspective. Their job is to be honest with themselves and you about their struggle with the divorce.

## Opening up

Your teenager probably understands why you got a divorce and on the surface may appear to take it in stride. But don't believe this masquerade. Your teen almost assuredly has a large pool of emotions swirling inside her about the divorce and the many changes it brings for her life. These emotions might include sadness, anger, loneliness, or depression. Some kids act these emotions out through attention seeking behavior while others turn the emotion inward and withdraw from nearly everyone around them. Neither leads to a healthy adjustment.

The best option is to help your teenager talk about their feelings. Putting feelings into words unlocks the painful and often confusing emotion that is often stored up inside them. It helps them make sense out of things that seem senseless. It adds clarity and perspective. It also enlightens you to their struggles and allows you to show support, empathy and care.

Teens vary greatly in their ability and willingness to open up to parents. Some will talk if they sense you are truly interested. Others may refuse to talk openly with you because they are angry and want to punish you.

And some teens need answers before they will talk. They need to know the truth about what "really" caused the marriage to end, why it couldn't be worked out, etc. Tough questions demand honest answers if you want your teen to trust you. Most are old enough to understand issues like "affairs" or other unpleasant topics that you would rather avoid. Be honest, use age-appropriate terms, but leave out details that might cause them greater confusion or pain or reflect negatively on your ex-spouse.

If they won't talk with you or you are unsure how to answer them, consider the school social worker, a therapist who specializes in working with adolescents, or a support group for teens from divorced families.

To whatever degree your teenager is willing to talk with you about their feelings regarding the divorce, express appreciation for their honesty. Resist defending your decisions or actions. Be willing to ask for forgiveness, listen carefully and empathize with their struggle even if you see it differently.

**Teenagers are not adults**

Adolescents from divorced homes often seem to grow up faster than other kids. They look like teenagers but their behavior seems more adult. It's easy for overwhelmed, lonely or time-starved single parents to expect their teen to be an adult; to fill in the gap of the missing parent. Yet this puts an unfair burden on the back of your teen that they shouldn't have to bear.

For example, teenage boys should not be expected to be the man of the house in their father's absence. Young girls should not be forced into spending their free time cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings. While it's fine to expect help from your teens with household chores and responsibilities, it's not okay to expect them to assume adult roles such as provider, repairman, confidant, housekeeper, secretary, etc.

By giving them permission to be a teen you also are making a statement that they are still emotionally dependent upon you. Following a divorce, teenagers need consistent routines, firm limits and a supportive relationship from both parents. Work hard at keeping traditions like eating dinners together, keep parameters in place like an established curfew, and support them by attending school events they participate in.

In an era where many teenagers are raising themselves, fight to stay emotionally connected to your child. They need your guidance, your discipline and your love, despite their insistence that they are self-sufficient.

### **Working as co-parent**

Perhaps the most difficult task in helping your teenager adjust to divorce is working amiably with your former spouse as a co-parent. This means that you and your spouse continue to work together for the benefit of your teenager despite your differences. To do this requires a mature attitude by you and your ex-spouse. It is not easy, but it is crucial to your child's adjustment.

Research is undeniably clear on this issue. Children from divorced families that have the equal support of both parents adjust far better than those embroiled in constant feuding between the parents. To create that type of supportive environment for your child, take these principles to heart:

- Refuse to talk poorly of your ex-spouse in front of your teen. Turning your teen against the other parent only hurts your child in the long run. They need to love and be loved by both parents.
- Don't discuss issues with your teen that need to be worked out between you and your ex-spouse. Examples include financial matters, visitation difficulties, miscommunications, etc.
- Never use your teenager to pass messages, spy, report, or check-up on ex-spouse. Always speak for yourself directly to your ex-spouse. Some situations may require a third party to resolve disputes, defuse conflicts, and teach cooperative skills. But if that is what's necessary, then do it for your teenager's sake. You are both parents to your child for life.

Adolescence brings confusion for both parent and child. Divorce and all it implies can turn confusion into chaos. But the best asset you have amid this chaos is your teenager. If you work hard to see the divorce through their eyes, they will give you most if not all of the answers you both need to weather the storm of not only adolescence but of divorce as well.