

What to Do When Your Divorced Parents Don't Get Along

Objective

To help you find support and know what to say when your divorced parents are constantly arguing and fighting.

You Should Know

If your parents have been through a divorce, it can be very stressful for the whole family, even if your parents have been friendly and cooperative throughout the process. For children who grow up in homes where the parents have fought a lot, it can be extra stressful. Perhaps you witnessed fighting or long periods of the “silent treatment” between your parents while they were still living together. Now that they are divorced, if they are still arguing, the stress continues. And it is easy to get caught in the middle and to struggle with feelings of divided loyalty, fear, anxiety, sadness, and anger.

The main thing you need to know is that it is not your fault that your parents are divorced. And it is not your job to try to fix them, counsel them, help them, or act as a go-between in their disagreements. This is easier said than done. In this worksheet, you will look at your current situation and then review some strategies for dealing with parents who fight and argue.

What to Do

How old were you when your parents divorced (or separated)? _____

Describe what that was like for you at the time. Perhaps you had positive feelings as well as negative ones. There is no right answer.

What are your main concerns right now in terms of how your parents' divorce is affecting you? What have you done to address these concerns, if anything?

Here are some “do’s and don’ts” for dealing with divorced parents who are fighting or arguing.

Do

- Talk to your parents individually. This might seem obvious and it might be very hard, but it still is important to say. Let each of them know how their fighting and arguing is affecting you. Tell them how hard it is for you.
- Ask to talk to your parents together and ask that they try harder to get along because it is making it very hard for you.
- Directly ask them not to fight in front of you, put you in the middle, or ask you to “take sides.”
- If you do not feel you can approach your parents individually or together, find a trusted adult to talk to—a relative, family friend, teacher, coach, or guidance counselor. Perhaps they can talk with your parents on your behalf or help your parents identify a family therapist who can work with them, or with the whole family.
- Keep in touch with both parents, even if one is far away and doesn’t communicate as much. Set up Skype or email connections to maintain your relationship (except in the case of past abuse or neglect or other trauma—then get help for figuring out appropriate contact, or not).

- Suggest compromises if possible if parents are fighting about, for instance, both wanting to attend an event or celebration in your honor but not wanting to attend together. Figure out a plan together to take turns or divide the time.
- Get active in your own life—make friends or join clubs. Just be sure not to isolate or stay home because you are trying to take care of one or both of your parents’ needs.
- Practice self-care, such as eating well, exercising, meditating, doing relaxation exercises, learning mindfulness.
- Join a support group for teens experiencing divorce or find an online forum or group for support.
- You can also ask to see a therapist so you have someone all to yourself to confide in.

Don’t

- Act as a go-between or messenger. If your parents aren’t talking to each other, tell them clearly and calmly that you cannot get in the middle. Ask them to find another way to communicate, such as email or text. Set limits as needed.
- Take sides, even if you clearly have a preference for one parent or a beef against the other. Putting yourself in the middle can only make matters worse and it is not fair to you or your parents.
- Try to play your parents against each other to get favors or privileges.
- Try to be their therapist or counselor. This is not your role. Suggest that they seek professional help.

Reflections on This Exercise

What is the first step you are willing to take to get help with this situation?

What would you like to say to each parent if you could say what you really feel?

Name three safe people you can go to for support and guidance.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
