

# Preschool-Age Children and Divorce



by Linda Ranson Jacobs

Parents of preschool-age children are wise to seek help when there is a divorce. At this age it's hard for the child to understand what is happening. All the child knows is that Daddy or Mommy was here and now that parent is not. Long explanations are usually not helpful with preschool-age children. For this age child, actions and facial expressions speak louder than words. Parents of this age child need to try and remain as calm as possible. Children this age need undivided attention, and that is going to be hard to maintain, but do the best you can in your circumstances.

Without knowing specific details of each situation, this article will speak in generalities. Every child is different, even children in the same families are different, and each situation is different. But there are some things that hold true for all 2-, 3- and 4-year-old children.

## Telling Your Child

The child needs to be told there is going to be a change. Tell the child that Daddy or Mommy is going to go live someplace else. If you are on friendly terms with the other parent, then take your child to wherever the other parent is going to live and show him around. Allow him to take a toy or something from your home to leave at the other parent's place. Tell him that this item will always be there when he visits. When and if he does visit the other parent's home, allow him to take personal belongings such as a blanket, toy, etc. These are items that should return home with him; they will not stay at the other

parent's home. It might be good to also send a T-shirt or an article of clothing that has your scent on it with your child. You can spray this article with perfume or aftershave. The child may choose to sleep in this item of clothing or just hold it close. Upon returning to your home, your child may want to bring an article of clothing from the other parent's home. Encourage this to take place. Try to keep in mind that the other person is also your child's parent. Your child may feel caught between two parents.

You may have to tell your child several times that daddy is living someplace else. Tell her that her dad is safe and that he knows how to take care of himself. Tell her that you and she are safe. Explain often that you will keep her safe, that you will take care of her and that you love her very much. If you know it to be true, you might also tell her that her daddy loves her very much also. If you are not sure of this, then keep quiet about how the other parent feels about your child. If you tell her that her daddy loves her when he doesn't, you will be setting your child up to distrust you later on. If you don't know and your child asks you, be truthful and say, "You know sweetie, I'm not sure about that. That is a question you'll need to ask your daddy."

When your child asks where his dad is, tell him the truth. If it's during the day, tell him his dad is at work. If he asks if his dad is coming home after work, just say, "No. He has another place to live." Take your cues from your child and really listen to his questions. Many times as adults we get too wrapped up in the divorce, and when a child says, "Where's daddy?" we tend to think they

are talking about the divorce when all the child really wants to know is where is his dad at that moment. Little children live in the moment. They speak what's on their minds, and then their minds will quickly switch to another topic.

Explain to your child that divorce is a problem between you and Daddy. I'm not sure I would say to the child at this point, "It's not your fault." It would depend on the maturity level and the level of understanding your child has. Your child may not think it is her fault unless you bring it up. As your child gets older, in a few years she may wonder if it was her fault. Tuck this concept in the back of your mind, and be aware that at some point your child may think the divorce is her fault. At that time be sure to tell her again that it was a problem between you and the other parent, and nothing that happened was her fault.

### **Dealing with Insecurities**

One of the most important concepts for preschool children is for them to know they are safe. Your child needs to know that you will be there and you are not going to leave. You don't need to say you are not leaving, but you might remind your child every night at bedtime, "Hey honey, remember I love you, and I'll be here in the morning when you wake up."

When you do have to take him to day care or leave him some place, tell him you will be coming back to pick him up. If he is really insecure when you leave, then try this idea. Take a key to your house or apartment, or use a dummy key, show him how you lock the door when you leave. Then put the key (dummy key) on a pretty ribbon or chain and place it around his neck. Ask him if he will keep the key to your home until you return to pick him up. (This is why I'd suggest a

dummy key.) Or you can ask the day care person to hang the key on a hook where your child will be able to see it all day. This will be saying to your child that you will always be back to pick him up. I have seen this work effectively with many different children.

Try to think back if your child and the other parent had any rituals. Did they exchange a high five every day, or a good-bye hug before work and school, or a special greeting or nickname? These are things that become rituals to little children. These rituals need to be replaced very quickly. Children are naturally ritual makers, even though they may not seem like rituals to you, they are to your child. One ritual my children and I started very shortly after their dad left was to say, "Home again, home again, rig-a-jig-jig." For them it was hard to come home every day and remember their dad wasn't going to be there. By saying this little rhyme, it put everyone in a better frame of mind. Sometimes they would extend it, and you could hear them as they entered the house saying, "To market, to market to buy a fat pig." Sounds silly, but my kids depended on us saying this. Keep remembering that children will turn things into rituals. You want them to adopt healthy rituals that help them connect with you.

Above all, develop a routine. Keep this routine the same every day. You might even write out your routine and put little pictures on it. For example when it's time to brush her teeth paste on a picture of a toothbrush, etc. Routines help a child feel secure. They can depend on what is coming next in their little lives. The not knowing what is going to happen next and the chaos in their lives may cause some children to feel too much stress. This stress may cause frenzied activity where your child cannot focus or settle down.

## Recognizing Different Emotions

Your child may become angry, and if this happens, he has a right to be angry. And it's okay for him to experience this anger. Help him identify and name what he is experiencing. When he is angry, say to him, "Seems to me you are mad right now. Let's think of something we can do to help you with this anger." Hitting and punching things will not help him with his anger. That activity only says, "When you are mad, it's okay to tear things up or hit things." Help him to learn constructive things to do with his anger. Even a 3-year-old can learn to vacuum a floor or wash a window. Doing these kinds of things helps him work out some of the extra energy that anger causes. Comment on how great the floor looks or how clean the window is after he is through. This will help him learn to direct his extra energy into contributing to his world. Or go for a long walk. This will use energy and change the scenery for him. Get outdoors and enjoy life with him. It's also okay for you to say, "You know, I'm feeling a little angry today too. How about you and I go for a walk or kick a ball around at the park? Let's get rid of some of this anger."

Some children will feel an intense sadness. Allow them to experience this sadness. To them a sad thing has happened. Telling them to be happy or trying to make them happy won't work. Describe to your child what you see, "Your mouth is turned down like this, and your eyes look sad. It seems you are sad today." Many times a small child can't put a name to her feelings. Describing what you see and naming it will help her better understand what is going on inside her body. Take your cues from your child at this point. Ask if there is anything you can do for her. Offer some suggestions such as climbing up on your lap; calling the other parent (if this is a possibility), reading a story or coloring a picture.

## Helping Your Child Process the Divorce

This age will do better if they can process their grief through play. Dollhouses with family characters allow them to dramatize their feelings on their developmental level. Sand trays with family and animal characters will help them work through some of their fears. Many young children will project their fears onto the various animal figures, and then they will use the people characters to work through what they wish the people around them would do and say. For a sand tray, go to a discount store and purchase a large kitty litter pan, fill it with sand from the garden department. Go to a dollar store and purchase some small toys to use in the sand.

Block play is good for this age child also. Boys especially will enjoy building different structures. Purchase some toy cars and trains for them to use with the blocks. Small animals and people will work well to help them work through some of their issues.

Children this age need art projects and art mediums that allow them to express their creativity. A paint easel or a large piece of newspaper laid out on a table or the floor along with one or two colors of tempera paint will allow him to express himself. Your child can "tell his story" through drawings and painting, and you can record or write what he says on the paper.

Another good source of release is water play. Water play is calming and can be relaxing as well as fun. Allow her to spend a lot of time in the bathtub in the evenings. Give her toys to play with in the tub. Even washing dishes with her parent or siblings can be fun.

Children will grieve the breakup of the only family they have known. They will go through various feelings such as sadness, anger, denial, acceptance and back again

through all the feelings. Children will take breaks from their grieving and forget about it for a while only to return to it again.

### **Helping Yourself**

The best thing any parent can do for his or her child is to register in a DivorceCare group close to your home. Go to [www.divorcecare.org](http://www.divorcecare.org). You can enter your zip code and do a search for a church near you that has DivorceCare. This group will help you work through your own feelings. When you do this, you will become a better parent for your child.

I know I have not given you much to say to your child, but for a 2-, 3- or 4-year-old words are not as important as your actions and your emotions. Your child will take his cues from you. If you are emotionally overwrought, he will not feel safe. Children model the adults around them, so if you scream and cry, he may not only mimic your actions, but he will not adjust very well to the separation. You don't need to always be happy but try to stay calm. It's okay to cry in front of your child, or if he finds you crying, you can just say, "Mommy is sad because Daddy is not here" or "Daddy is sad because Mommy is not here." No more explanation needs to be said. If he says he is sad too, then ask him, "Would you like a big bear hug?" or "Would you like to climb up here in my lap and we can just sit together for a few minutes." Or you might try singing a song or telling your child a story. If he finds you really angry, then say, "Mommy (Daddy) is really mad today, but I'll be okay in a few minutes" and then try to calm down. Model how you work through your anger in appropriate ways, whether that's knocking around a softball, slam dunking a few baskets, riding a bike, going for a walk or cleaning the house.

### **Developing Your Single Parent Home**

Children will need a parent who can set boundaries and limits for them. Some children will test the limits, but remain consistent. Children feel safer when the parent is in charge of the home. Make your rules simple and age appropriate, but do have some consistent rules. Assign jobs and responsibilities to your child. Even a 2-year-old can help sort the laundry and take her clothes to her room. A 3-year-old can help fold clothes, and a 4-year-old can learn to set the table, and all the children can learn to clean up after themselves. Children will feel like they belong when they contribute to the home.

Above all else pray with your child. Pray for the other parent's safety. Pray practical things for the other parent such as the other parent wakes up on time. Pray you and your child have a happy day today. Pray you and your child find joy in the day and in God's world. Small children have a natural inclination to believe in God. Allow this to happen and encourage that feeling.

I hope this helps you and your child adjust. Change is hard for everyone but especially hard on children.

Deuteronomy 33:27 "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." Image that-God holding His arms under you to hold you up.

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Linda Ranson Jacobs is the DC4K creator and developer. For more information, email [info@dc4k.org](mailto:info@dc4k.org). To discover more about DivorceCare for Kids or to find a DC4K group near you, go to [www.dc4k.org](http://www.dc4k.org).