

PARENT'S GUIDE

to Helping your Middle Schooler with Divorce

Whether it happens in your home, in your extended family, or with other adults in your middle schooler's life, chances are that your kid will directly or indirectly be affected by the demise of marriage. Divorce isn't easy for anyone to process. But the middle school years pose unique challenges. Adolescence is already a season of transition—physically, socially, and emotionally. The average middle schooler is trying to cope with body changes, hormones, peer influences, relationships, and increased pressure academically. Factor in a huge shift at home, and they may feel as if their world is falling apart.

To complicate the situation further, their challenges are compounded by most middle schooler's inability to clearly articulate what they're thinking or feeling. And if they do talk, they may demand answers you aren't able to or willing to divulge.

To better understand how to approach your kid when discussing divorce, it is helpful to know where they're coming from developmentally. In each phase of middle school, your kid is asking a fundamental question.

While these questions are not exclusive to a particular phase, they generally fit the developmental point for that grade level. Regardless of the question they may be asking, there is one thing that remains the same no matter their age—they need your unconditional love and support as they face an uncertain future.

SIXTH GRADE >>> WHO DO I LIKE? (OR WHO LIKES ME?)

In this phase, moods can switch at any given moment. If your kid is distant and seemingly emotionless at one moment, and then dramatic and clingy the next, that's to be expected. Allow them to feel what they're feeling, remaining a constant source of stability and empathy as much as possible.

Your sixth grader is longing for someone to prove to them that they care. Your divorce may reinforce the idea that no one does. It may take time, consistency, and a lot of failed attempts for you to prove to them that you're still a family, even if that family looks different in the future.

SEVENTH GRADE >>> WHO AM I?

In this phase, your middle schooler is trying to figure out, "Who am I?" With a divorce, their identity crisis may intensify. Continue to remind them that who they are still matters and is important—regardless of whether or not their parents are married.

This is also the phase when what they're feeling at any given moment matters most. In other words, you can tell them over and over again that "everything is going to be okay," but if it doesn't "feel okay" to them right now, it's never going to be okay as far as they're concerned. Continue to support them emotionally, and be careful not to dismiss them if they seem "illogical" in how they process what they're feeling.

Your seventh grader may view your divorce through the lens of how it will affect their social circle. They'll need to be reassured that whenever possible, their friendships will remain the same.

EIGHTH GRADE >>> WHO DO I WANT TO BE?

In this phase, you'll be hard-pressed to get your middle schooler to give you a straight answer about what they want for dinner—much less about how they're processing your divorce. When talking to your kid, try starting the conversation by saying, "You don't have to respond right now. I'm going to bring this up again later. If you want to talk then, that's fine." That will alleviate some of the pressure for both of you.

Remember, your eighth grader is in a phase when being “cool” is everything. They’re making decisions about what they want to believe and what they want to stand for. And though they may pretend like they’re not upset or bothered by the divorce, that is not likely the case. Remember to assure your kid again and again that you are there, and that you are listening—even if they insist they’re “fine.”

WIDEN THE CIRCLE

Now more than ever, it’s critical that you intentionally invite people into your family circle. Your impulse may be to turn inward and shut people out, but prolonged isolation is detrimental to you *and* your kids. Even if it’s just one person in the early days following your separation/divorce, getting a healthy, stable adult who is not you in your kid’s life can do wonders for their healing and stability.

If your middle schooler isn’t already connected to a local church and/or student ministry, this may be the perfect catalyst to get them involved.

As always, don’t hesitate to reach out to a professional counselor on behalf of your middle schooler whenever necessary.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

If you’re going through a divorce, please know that there is hope for you and your family. Yes, divorce can be a traumatic experience for the children involved, but research suggests that most kids and teens adjust to “the new normal” within two years following a divorce.¹

The changes brought on by separation and divorce can be overwhelming, but it’s important to prioritize self-care. Try getting involved in activities you used to love but haven’t done in a while. Or try new hobbies and activities.

Whenever possible, stay or get connected to your local church.

¹<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/healthy-divorce>

Helping your Middle Schooler Walk Through a Friend's Parents' Divorce

"My friend's parents are getting divorced."

Even if divorce isn't part of your personal story, it's likely that your kid will have someone close to them experience its effects. As a parent, it can be difficult to know how to help your middle schooler support their friend during this traumatic event.

Here are a few things you can coach them to say:

- "I can't imagine what you're going through, but I'm here if you want to talk."
- "I don't have all the answers, but I'm here for you."
- "It won't feel this painful forever."
- "Your parents' divorce isn't your fault."
- "You're still you. I don't think of you differently."
- "God is with you and your family, even if it doesn't feel like it."

Coach them to offer support in nonverbal ways, too. They can:

- Treat the friend the same as they did *before* their parents' divorce.
- Invite the friend to hang out outside of school, giving them a break from a potentially contentious environment at home.
- Pray—ask that God would bring peace to their friend, and that God would help.

You can offer support as a family by:

- Offering to carpool
- Dropping off a gift card to a restaurant or pizza place
- Including the family in community events or get-togethers

One important idea to express is that it is *not* your kid's responsibility to "fix" their friend's hurt or pain. All they can do is offer love, support, and friendship over time.