

PARENT'S GUIDE

to Helping your High Schooler with Divorce

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

To complicate the situation further, their challenges are compounded by their reluctance to openly talk about their feelings or even their problems. And if they do talk, they may demand answers you aren't able to or willing to divulge. That's why, especially at this phase, it can be tempting to *overshare*.

To better understand how to approach your student when discussing divorce, it is helpful to know where they're coming from developmentally. In each phase of high school, your student is asking a fundamental question. And while they may not realize it, these questions affect how they see themselves and the world around them, including your family. That's why sometimes the best way to help your kid cope with a divorce is to answer the question they may not even realize they're asking right now.

Regardless of the question your kid is asking right now, there is one thing that remains the same no matter their age: they need you to show your unconditional love and support as they face an uncertain future.

NINTH GRADE >>> WHERE DO I BELONG?

To help a ninth grader process divorce, it will be important for you to communicate their unconditional *belonging*. Point out that families look different for everyone and that even if their other parent's involvement is lessened or minimal, there's no one definition of what makes a family a family. Reassure your freshman that they're still part of a family that loves them fiercely, and that they play a unique and irreplaceable role in that family.

It may be helpful to widen your family's circle to include other families whose stories include divorce, but who are a little further down the road in the process. Giving students examples of how things may look in the future can help them imagine a good future and give perspective on ways they can belong in their new environment.

TENTH GRADE >>> WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE?

Judging a sophomore's ability to handle adult matters is tricky. In this phase, they can *appear* very mature and capable. However, don't be mistaken—your tenth grader is still a kid and needs to be protected and reassured during this transition.

When you begin discussions with your tenth grader about divorce, come prepared—because they're going to have questions! Some questions you may be able to answer, and other, more personal or sensitive questions, you may not be able. Decide ahead of time how much of the story you are willing to share and maintain good boundaries.

It's okay to say, "I don't know" or "I'm not comfortable sharing that with you yet." Avoid demeaning language like, "You're too young to know that" or "Maybe when you're older." Follow up with, "I'm sorry I can't tell you everything right now. I don't have all the answers. I do know that I want the best for you. I love you. I'm here if you want to talk more about this later."

ELEVENTH GRADE >>> HOW CAN I MATTER? & TWELFTH GRADE >>> WHAT WILL I DO?

For your junior or senior, getting your busy schedules to line up long enough to *have* a conversation about divorce will be your first challenge. Show them respect by asking to get on their calendar for a specific date, time, and place, even if it's at home. Keep the location intimate and private, allowing them to feel comfortable enough to express any emotions they may need to during your discussion. And if your teen may need more time, they can still be assured that they are in a safe environment. Let them know the topic will be important and that their attendance will not be optional. (As with all topics of this magnitude, this will not be a one-time conversation. However, the initial discussion will likely require specific logistics.)

The most important idea to express to your teen will be a delicate combination of support and empowerment. Say things like, "Divorce is an event that happens to you, but it does not define you" or "This is hard for me, but I can't imagine what it's like for you."

As teenagers get older, often their sense of responsibility and the pressure that comes with responsibility is increased. And while that's nice for grocery runs and household chores, it can be tempting for them to step into roles too mature for them during family transitions. Reassure your teen that while things are changing, they have no responsibility for causing or fixing anyone's divorce at this stage of life. Their "job" is to be your loved and responsible teenager—nothing more.

One temptation for nearly all juniors and seniors is to bypass painful family circumstances since they imagine they'll be out of the house soon anyway. And while the idea of a "get out of pain free" card sounds nice, it isn't really possible. Your junior or senior will process the divorce eventually, and it's better to do so in a safe place like your home than on their own.

WIDEN THE CIRCLE

Now more than ever, it's critical that you intentionally invite people into your family's circle. In painful transitions, our 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 teen's life can do wonders for their healing and stability. You can also prepare this adult by being clear and providing boundaries around the information that is given to your kids, let them know what your kids do and do not know, as well as what should or should not be shared.

If your high 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 teen 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 High 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 student will have someone close to them experience its effects. As a parent, it can be difficult to know how to help your student support their friend during this traumatic event. And, it's even more difficult for your teenager to know what to say. Give them a helping hand by giving them a few words or phrases they can use to encourage their friend during the difficult times.

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

- "I can't imagine what you're going through, but I'm here if you want to talk or just spend time together and hang out."
- "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."

Following up can make a big difference for their friends but can be daunting for your student, so here are a few things they can ask and in which can be helpful:

- "What's the best way I can help you right now?"
- "When is the best time I can text/check-in?"
- "How are you doing with all of the changes?"

They can 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.

