



Christina McGhee

# PARENTING APART



How Separated and  
Divorced Parents  
Can Raise Happy  
and Secure Kids

SAMPLE CHAPTER 7 | PARENTING APART

## Factors That Affect How Children Handle Divorce

# Factors That Affect How Children Handle Divorce

*Live so that when your children think of fairness and integrity, they think of you.*

—H. JACKSON BROWN JR.

Mike said he just didn't understand what to do. His 11-year-old daughter, Shelly, was a roll-with-the-punches kind of kid. She rarely talked about her feelings and often commented that she didn't understand what all the fuss was about. On the surface, Shelly seemed fine with her parents' decision to divorce. While she wished they had made a different choice, she told her father sometimes you just have to deal with things and move on. Her 14-year-old sister, Brenda, however, was another matter entirely. Brenda was devastated by the divorce. She was frequently moody and cried often. She talked about her feelings in detail with her father on a regular basis. While Mike was concerned that Brenda was taking the divorce so hard, he felt reassured that at least she was talking about it. "I don't know which one to be more worried about, Brenda, the one who is sad and talks to me, or Shelly, the one who seems okay, but never talks about it."

Much like Mike, you, too, may be wondering what's normal and what you should be worried about. The truth is no two children will go through

divorce in the exact same way. What seems okay for one child may be a warning sign for another. While there are similar stages that every child will experience, how each one goes through them and to what degree they are affected will vary. As in Mike's case, it is also quite common for children in the same family to have very different divorce experiences. If you have more than one child, you may have your work cut out for you. To recognize where your children are in the process and how they are handling it, you need to have an understanding of the various factors that influence adjustment.

## **Factors That Affect How Children Manage and Adjust to Divorce**

In general, your children's reactions can be influenced by a number of factors. Some of those factors you can shape and some you cannot.

### **Factors you may have some influence or control over:**

- How you are managing the divorce.
- Amount of tension and conflict between you and the other parent.
- How and what your children are told about the separation or divorce.
- The number of changes your children experience while the divorce is happening.
- Level of support your children receive from outside the family.

### **Factors you can't control but need to be aware of:**

- Age and level of development of your child.
- Personality of your child.
- Gender of your child.
- How the other parent is handling the divorce.

All of these factors have some bearing on your child's overall adjustment. Yet, time and time again professionals and researchers have identified the two most influential factors as:

- How parents handle the divorce process for themselves.
- How Mom and Dad interact with each other after the breakup.

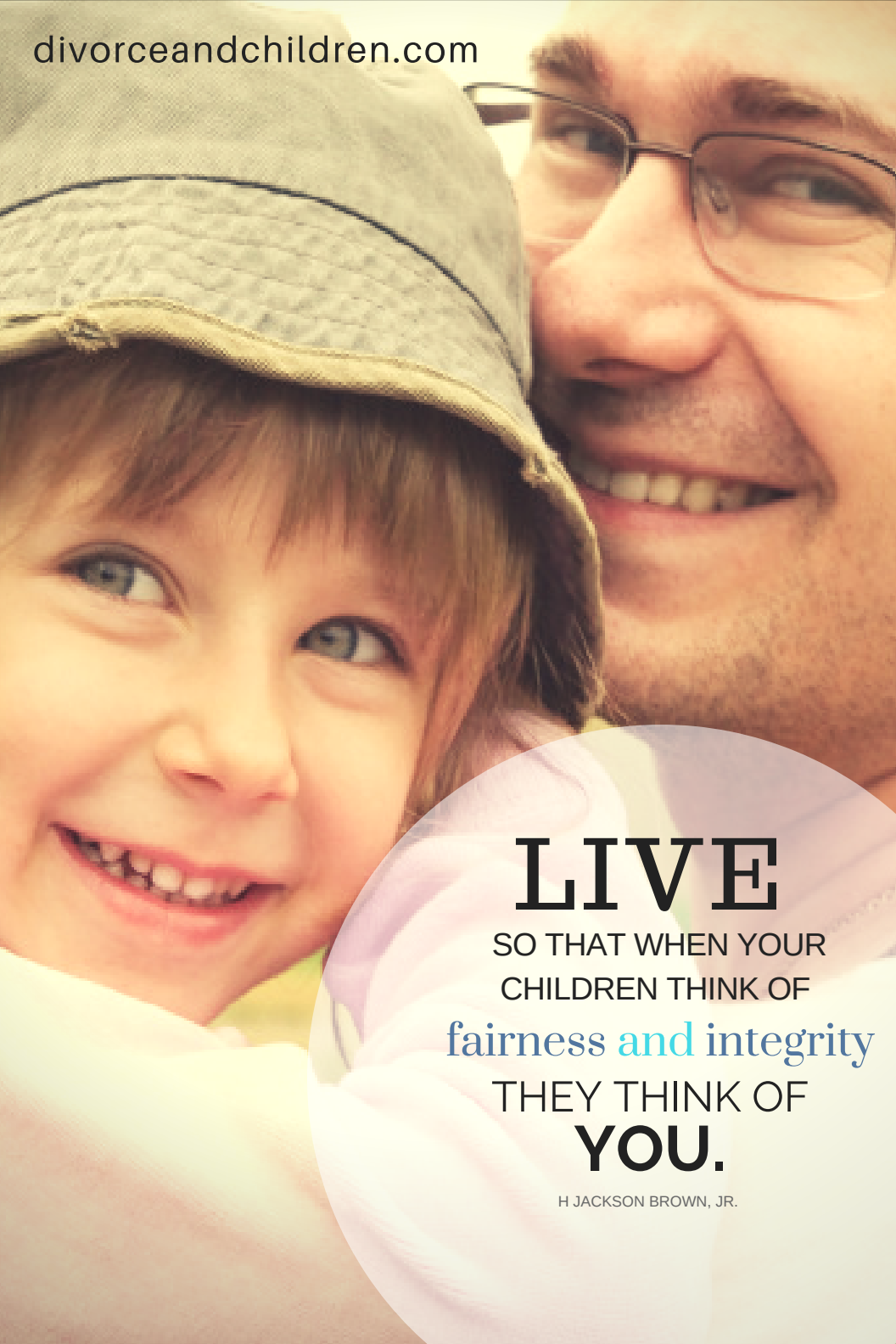
More about these factors can be found in Chapters 1 and 16.

## Emotional Stages of Loss for Children

Has this ever happened to you? Your child comes home from school, and you innocently ask, "How was your day?" Your child responds with the typical one-word answer, "Fine." Yet the look on his face and the tone of his voice suggest that his day was anything but fine. Curious, you decide to dig a little deeper. "Is something bothering you?" To which your child quickly responds in a rather put-out tone, "No, nothing's bothering me, why do you have to ask so many questions?" If your house is anything like mine, these kinds of conversations usually take a quick nosedive. The downward spiral typically results in either a stern reminder about the need to be respectful or, in more serious cases, somebody getting sent to his room. However, if you remain patient and persistent, with a certain amount of luck the walls usually crumble, and your child ends up confessing that he has had the worst day ever.

Children don't always use words to tell you how they feel. Often kids are *showing* us how they feel. Sometimes the slam of the door, the way they roll their eyes when you ask them a question, or the expression on their face tells you more than what they have said. When divorce and separation enters the scene, you may find when your children do tell you with words, sometimes the words don't always match up with their behavior. To make things more complicated, you can't necessarily tell what is related to divorce and what is just normal developmental kid stuff. While





**LIVE**

SO THAT WHEN YOUR  
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H JACKSON BROWN, JR.

it is important to hear what children are saying with their words, it is also important to know what kinds of behaviors to look for. Thus this chapter reviews the process of grief and loss, looking at both what kids might say and what kids might do when they are struggling with these stages. How these stages affect you as a parent are addressed in Chapter 3.

## **Denial**

Denial is one way children try to protect themselves from events in life they cannot change or control. When faced with the possibility of separation or divorce your children might choose to deal with the issue by not acknowledging it as real. You may find that your children will either flat-out refuse to talk about divorce or simply change the subject every time you bring it up. They may give the outward appearance that Mom and Dad's splitting up is really no big deal and casually talk about how other kids in their school have divorced parents too. Older children might use physical distance as a way to disengage or separate themselves from the reality of divorce. When this happens, children spend more time hanging out with friends or may keep themselves busier than usual with activities. This helps them avoid the reality of what is going on at home between Mom and Dad.

In some situations when parents choose to separate, one parent remains in the family home while the other parent sets up a new place to live. For some children, spending time in the other household may be a painful reminder that things have changed permanently. If your children are not ready to accept that reality, they may avoid or minimize time in their other parent's home. When this happens, you can easily make the mistake of thinking your child is refusing time in the other home because the other parent did something wrong. For example, let's say Johnny doesn't want to see Mom in her new apartment. Dad might assume it is because Johnny is angry with Mom or perhaps because Mom's apartment isn't Johnny's real home. Mom, in turn, may think that Johnny's reluctance is Dad's fault because he is not supporting her relationship. From

### RECOGNIZING DENIAL IN YOUR CHILDREN

When children are in denial they may

- Refuse to talk about the divorce.
- Hang on to the hope that Mom and Dad will work things out.
- Change the subject when you talk about separation or divorce.
- Choose not to tell others (friends, teachers, other family members).
- Make up excuses to explain changes in the family.
- Talk about the family as if nothing had changed.
- Act as if everything is okay or say it's no big deal.
- Arrange or plan events that involve both parents being together.
- Resist spending time in the other parent's home because it makes the situation more real for them.
- Create distractions or keep themselves busy so they don't have to deal with what has happened (getting involved in activities, spending more time with friends, spending more time away from the family, spending time alone watching TV or playing video games).

her point of view, she may believe Dad is deliberately sabotaging her time with Johnny to get even with her for leaving. While there are lots of reasons children might resist spending time with their other parent, be careful not to jump to conclusions.

### *What Can You Do?*

Understand your children will need time to accept that the family has changed. **In the early stages, do your best to keep life in your home predictable by maintaining regular routines and normal activities.** This means making sure your children are getting to bed at a reasonable hour, having regular meals as a family, providing children with opportunities to be active, and maintaining their ongoing access to supportive


people outside of the family. Consistency in their day-to-day lives will also help your children feel more secure while they adjust to the separation. If possible, avoid making significant changes such as moving, changing schools, or withdrawing your children from extracurricular activities that they enjoy. Divorce is a tremendous loss for a child and involves lots of changes. Don't give them more to deal with than necessary.

Also, make sure your children are having consistent and regular contact with their other parent. Even though you may have strong feelings about the situation, it is very important to encourage your child's relationship with your ex. Children need the security of knowing that while you may be divorcing each other, neither of you is divorcing them. Keep in mind that even though you may tell your children with words that you will always love them, it is imperative that you back it up with action. This means that you offer children reassurance by doing things like giving them hugs, spending quality time with them, or making a point to check in regularly to see how they're doing.

## Anger

No doubt about it, anger is probably one of the most challenging and difficult stages to cope with for parents. While dealing with angry children is certainly no fun, keep in mind it is an expected and normal part of their grieving process. Most important, when your children are expressing their anger and frustration make sure you do not:

- React to your child's anger by becoming angry yourself. (Try not to fight fire with fire and respond by hollering, arguing, or threatening.)
- Allow the situation to become a power struggle. (Try not to become focused on enforcing a rule instead of acknowledging the feeling by saying something like, "I don't care what you do at your mom's house. You will go to bed now because I said so!")
- Inappropriately use humor by belittling or putting down your child's feelings. (Try not to say something like, "Only babies whine

A close-up, profile view of a child's face on the right side of the frame, blowing a bubble. Inside the bubble is a small, detailed image of the Earth (a globe). The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and yellow, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall tone is hopeful and resilient.

# KIDS ARE STRONGER THAN YOU THINK.

.....

Our job isn't to protect  
them from **ADVERSITY**  
but to help them find  
**A WAY THROUGH IT.**

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and throw temper tantrums when they don't get their way. Are you a little baby?")

- Ignore or dismiss how your child feels. (Try not to say something like, "Stop carrying on and do what I say.")
- Punish your child for feeling angry. (Try not to become focused on punishing the behavior without addressing the feeling by saying something like, "You will not speak to me that way," "I don't want to hear another word from you," or "Go to your room you're grounded.")

The upset that children feel is often increased by the uncertainty divorce brings to their lives. Many times they may not understand or even

### **RECOGNIZING ANGER IN YOUR CHILDREN**

When children are feeling angry they may:

- Break rules or test limits.
- Say "I hate you" or "I want to live with my other parent."
- Blame one or both parents for the divorce.
- Throw temper tantrums or start biting, hitting, kicking, or breaking things (especially toddlers and school-age children).
- Fight with siblings.
- Become physically aggressive at home or in school (pushing, shoving, or threatening to hit).
- Overreact to situations (become intensely angry over minor issues).
- Have frequent emotional outbursts (hollering, screaming, or being openly rude to others).
- Withdraw or emotionally shut down (go to their room to be alone, become silent, or refuse to talk).
- Engage in risky or dangerous behaviors, such as drinking and driving, using drugs, or sexually acting out (especially teens and preadolescents).

be able to identify how they are feeling. Instead they are reacting to their feelings of frustration. After all, life as your children have known it is over. Virtually everything has changed and they can't do anything about it.

It's also important for you to realize that when children are feeling angry they typically direct their anger toward the parent they feel safest with. When your children get angry with you, rest assured you are doing a marvelous job as a parent. Children need to know that no matter how upset, frustrated, or angry they get, you will always love them. It's when children know they can trust you that they feel safe enough to express their feelings.

This issue of trust and anger can create additional complications for parents, especially if one parent is getting stuck dealing with most of the anger and upset from the children. More information about what you can do when your children are acting out at one house but not the other is offered in Chapter 25.

### ***What Can You Do?***

Even though your children will have to make lots of adjustments, they still need to know that life will be okay. One way you can reassure your children is by continuing to be a family. An important part of being a family is not just providing children with love and understanding but also having respect, guidelines, structure, and discipline. Unfortunately, this is when the *divorce guilt syndrome* kicks in for most of us. It goes something like this: Imagine you feel incredibly guilty about the hurt and pain your children are feeling because of the divorce. Suzy is having emotional meltdowns and temper tantrums around the clock. Bobby decides to take advantage of Suzy's meltdown and won't turn off the TV to do his homework. Next thing you know, it's nine o'clock, supper's not ready yet, and it's already past their bedtime. When this happens, you find yourself threatening the children within an inch of their lives: "If you two don't knock it off, I am going to ground you for a month." Of course, this is about the 20th time today you have told the children this.

During this time, you might be tempted to back off from disciplining or staying consistent with your children. After all, aren't they hurting enough already? Do you really need to send Suzy to time-out because she lay in the middle of the floor and screamed for 20 minutes? Should you take away Bobby's cell phone because he flunked his math test? In a word, yes. While you may be tempted to go easy on the kids during this time, children need both love and limits. Especially when they are feeling angry. Yes, they need you to give them love and support. ("I can understand why you would feel angry about this," "I am sorry this is so hard for you.") However, they also need to know you will continue to be a family, and that means providing discipline and structure. ("While I understand you are angry, it is not okay to hit your sister. If you hit your sister you will get grounded.")

## **Bargaining**

Bargaining is a time when children put their energy and effort into trying to save the family. While parents experience bargaining as having second thoughts, children usually wish for things to go back to the way they were. It is important to know that even when life improves for children after parents separate, the wish that things could have been different between Mom and Dad does not go away easily.

Almost all children feel some level of responsibility for things not working out between Mom and Dad. While you may tell them with words they are not to blame, your children may not believe you. Actually, if you think about the situation from your child's perspective, it's easy to see why they feel responsible. When you and your ex have an argument, what are you usually arguing about? If you are like most parents, your answer is the kids. From what time they are picked up on Sunday to who gets to open presents with them on Christmas morning. Regardless of the reason, from your children's point of view, if all the arguments are about us or have to do with us, then it must be our fault. This is another reason



# Ready

to get your  
life back?

It's normal to feel overwhelmed and unprepared for all the changes divorce throws your way,

That doesn't mean that your life and the lives of your kids have to be overshadowed by divorce.

Whether you are parenting on your own, recently separated, in the throes of getting a divorce or years down the road, find out how coaching can help.

tell me more



**You don't have  
to go through  
this alone.**

parent conflict is so incredibly damaging to children. When parents engage in open warfare with one another, children naturally feel they are to blame.

### **RECOGNIZING BARGAINING IN YOUR CHILDREN**

When children are bargaining, they may:

- Promise to be good, behave better, or follow all the rules.
- Create health problems (stomachache, headache) so parents will have to care for them.
- Create a crisis or an emergency situation so parents will have to work together.
- Ask or expect parents to hug or kiss at an exchange (especially young children).
- Plan special events or reasons for parents to have contact with one another.
- Focus on becoming the perfect child so parents don't have anything to fight about.
- Become a discipline problem at school or home so that parents have a common cause (get parents to focus on child rather than each other).
- Feel responsible or blame themselves for the separation or divorce.

### ***What Can You Do?***

One of the most effective ways to help your children is to minimize conflict with the other parent. Again, this is one of those areas where it is much easier to say it than to do it. However, for your children to resolve their feelings of guilt and responsibility, you need to find some other way to manage your differences.

Consistently reinforce for your children that your decision to divorce had nothing to do with them. Your children will also need to hear that no matter how much they wish or hope, they cannot fix or change what has happened in the family. Bottom line, divorce is never a child's fault.

## Depression

When children realize that they can't change or fix what has happened in the family, the loss and sadness they feel can become very strong. As with the other stages, the degree and intensity of children's sadness will depend on a number of factors. For more detailed information about helping children successfully cope with depression be sure to read Chapter 26.

Much like anger, depression is often a hard stage for parents to deal with. While it is incredibly painful to see your child being upset or hurt, the sadness they feel over the loss of the family needs to be recognized and given value. Although it is natural to want to fix or shield your children from hurtful situations, don't avoid your children's sadness by:

- Dismissing the feeling. (Try not to say something like, "Oh, you're just tired. Why don't you get some sleep, that'll make you feel better.")
- Trying to make it better. (Try not to say something like, "Hey, we don't need to sit around the house and be sad. How about we go out to eat and see a movie?")
- Removing the problem. (Try not to say something like, "If Dad's phone calls make you feel sad then maybe he should stop calling you every night.")
- Explaining the feeling away. (Try not to say something like, "Oh, you know, some times things just happen.")
- Ignoring it. (Try not to say something like, "Everything will be better tomorrow.").
- Denying or shaming the feeling. (Try not to say something like, "Come on, don't be a baby, you're too big to cry about this.")
- Changing the subject. (Try not to say something like, "Yes, I know that was upsetting for you. But wouldn't you rather talk about something happy like what we're going to do this weekend?")

### RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION IN YOUR CHILDREN

When children are feeling intensely sad they may:

- Start having problems in school (lower grades, easily distracted, lack of motivation or interest).
- Become withdrawn (ask to be left alone, or choose to do things separate from others).
- Pull back from important relationships with family and friends.
- Not be able to stay focused or concentrate.
- Seem tense, on edge, or irritable.
- Not have an interest in activities they used to really enjoy.
- Appear to be consistently sad day after day.
- Have trouble sleeping at night.
- Feel tired, lack energy, or want to sleep all the time.
- Become easily upset or frequently tearful.
- Be disinterested in food (skipping meals, no appetite, noticeable weight loss).
- Use food as a way to deal with feelings (eating comfort foods when upset, noticeable weight gain).
- Say things like "I wish I had never been born" or "Maybe life would be better without me around."

Instead, let your children know they have a right to feel sad. Make sure that you are also dealing with your own sadness in a healthy and responsible way. If not, you run the risk of confusing your emotional needs with the needs of your children. Of course, this does not mean you should hide your feelings from your children. Sharing your upset or sadness can be an opportunity to help kids understand that it's okay to be sad. Children learn by example. Even though divorce is difficult, use it as a way to teach your children how to cope with tough situations.

# CHRISTINA MCGHEE

COACH, SPEAKER, WRITER, HOPELESS CAUSE FIGHTER AND OCCASIONAL PROJECT JUNKIE



Growing up my parents always told me I would go to college someday and become a lawyer.

The reason? So I could handle their divorce. At the time, it seemed like a big joke to me. Turned out, they weren't joking.

Read Christina's back story

## What Parents Are Saying

"My coaching sessions with Christina allowed me to see things more clearly through the eyes of my children, something I'd failed to do before. I will be eternally grateful for her skilled insight and extraordinary compassion."

Tom, New York

"I was desperate for help. Working with Christina I was able to gain an understanding of what was happening and learn how to protect my children. Christina gave me hope and taught me how to be a better parent."

Ann, Texas



### **WHEN CHILDREN SAY THINGS LIKE “I WISH I HAD NEVER BEEN BORN”**

Any statement made by a child that indicates a wish to die, disappear, or no longer exist needs to be taken very seriously. Don't wait for your child to act on these feelings. *Seek help immediately.* While your child may not have the intention of permanently hurting himself or herself, children are often impulsive and lack good decision-making skills, especially when they are depressed. When children make statements about taking themselves out of the picture, they are sending you a clear message: They need your help. Further information about seeking professional intervention can be found in Chapter 27.

### ***What Can You Do?***

In addition to telling children it is okay to be sad, help them find appropriate ways to deal with the sadness. Most children and parents find that as time passes, the sadness related to divorce begins to decrease. However, if feelings or symptoms related to depression seem to be getting worse for either you or your children, seek out the professional help of a counselor, therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist.

Typically professional intervention is recommended if you or your children are:

- Experiencing multiple symptoms for extended periods of time (having two or more symptoms for most of the day, nearly every day for several weeks).
- Finding symptoms interfere with day-to-day functioning (can't get out of bed in the morning, are unable to focus or concentrate, can't accomplish simple daily tasks, have significant change in grades or school performance).
- Feeling an overwhelming sense of hopelessness (don't care about anything; view everything as bad, negative, or never getting better).

- Having thoughts of suicide, hurting themselves, or just going away (make statements like “Life would be so much better if I would just disappear”).

## Acceptance

For the vast majority of families, after the dust settles and some time has passed, life begins to feel normal again. Children begin adjusting to their schedules between homes, and transitions become smoother. You may also notice that you now have some emotional distance from issues that used to set you on edge. Often parents are able to talk things through more easily and can be more flexible with one another regarding arrangements. Essentially, life settles down for you and your children.

### RECOGNIZING ACCEPTANCE IN YOUR CHILDREN

When your children have reached acceptance they may:

- Feel more comfortable with transitions between homes.
- Be able to see benefits to Mom and Dad being happier.
- Do a better job of managing their feelings.
- Have the ability to separate themselves from parent problems.
- Feel more emotionally balanced.
- Have less intense feelings about the divorce.
- Be able to acknowledge both the positive and negative aspects of divorce.
- Reengage in activities or develop new interests.
- Feel a sense of hope and have a more positive view of their future.

Don't forget that separation and divorce are lifelong processes that do not end once you receive your final orders from the family court. As life changes for you and your children, expect that old feelings or new issues will come up. Usually when feelings resurface, they will be less intense, and you as well as your children will be better at managing them.



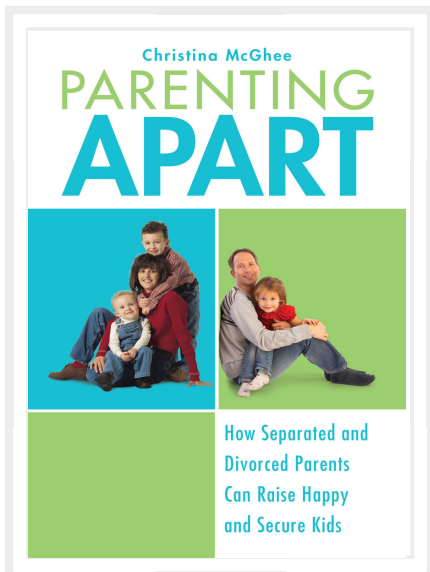


# PARENTING APART

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divorced parent would read."



Right now there's probably nothing you want more than to help your children through this difficult time. The good news is you don't need to put your life on hold while you search for answers.

**PARENTING APART** offers you quick and easy access to the information you need to tackle tough coparenting problems.

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