

LITTLE **children**
BIG challenges: **divorce**





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The nonprofit educational organization behind Sesame Street and so much more

Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit educational organization that revolutionized children's television programming with the landmark *Sesame Street*. The Workshop produces local *Sesame Street* programs, seen in over 140 countries, and other acclaimed shows to help bridge the literacy gap, including *The Electric Company*. Beyond television, the Workshop produces content for multiple media platforms on a wide range of issues including literacy, health, and military deployment. Initiatives meet specific needs to help young children and families develop critical skills, acquire healthy habits, and build emotional strength to prepare them for lifelong learning. Learn more at sesameworkshop.org.

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Family Changes

Though divorce and separation bring about very difficult transitions, they also bring opportunities for your child to learn that our paths in life are always changing. Most of all, they're an opportunity to show your child just how strong your love can be.

To help you and your child, Sesame Workshop has created *Little Children, Big Challenges: Divorce*. Inside the guide you'll find

- ♥ suggestions for addressing children's questions about divorce,
- ♥ tips for encouraging children to express their emotions,
- ♥ resources aimed at helping you get any support or information you might need, and
- ♥ ideas for helping children transition into a blended family.

Every situation is different, and no one knows your family better than you do. Whether you are in the beginning phases of your divorce or in the process of adjusting to your new life, you can adapt the activities to address your unique needs.



You Can Always Ask

Small children can have very big questions, and some of these questions may be very hard to answer. In the following pages, you'll find questions your child might ask about divorce along with talking points and activities that will help you give an answer.



*Why did you
get a divorce?*

Questions can be hard to answer.



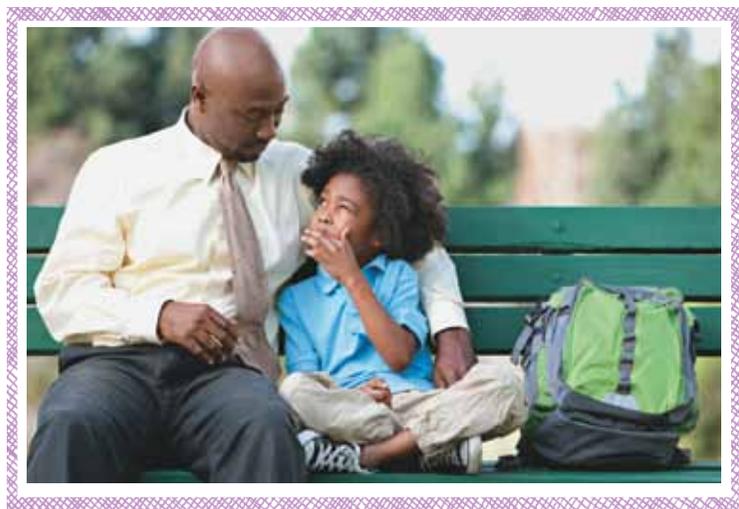
What's a divorce?

Your child may ask this question at home, or surprise you when in the car, or even bring it up in line at the supermarket. When it's time to have the conversation, it helps to hold your child close and, if possible, sit together in a comfortable and familiar place. While you talk, hold her hand, brush her hair, or give her a long hug. A simple touch can let her know you're there for her.

You can begin: "A divorce is when two people who are married decide not to be married anymore. Although we won't be married anymore, we will always be your mom and dad."

You can try cutting out a heart from construction paper and drawing a picture of both of you in the middle of it. As you talk together, let your child know that no matter what, she is always in your heart and on your mind.

Answering questions is an ongoing process. Your child may begin asking you questions right away or bring them up at a later time, when you least expect it.



Why did you get a divorce?

You might have many answers to this question. The best thing is to keep in mind that there are certain things your child needs to know and other things that should be avoided.

You can begin: “Mommy and Daddy had grown-up problems that we couldn’t fix, even though we tried and tried. Even though we decided not to be married to each other anymore, we will always love you and care for you. We want you to know that our divorce is not your fault. You did nothing to cause the divorce.”

You can try leaving a jar on the shelf. Every so often drop a rock in the jar as you mention one special thing about your child. As you talk about your child’s wonderful attributes remind him that your divorce is not his fault.

Before talking with your child, give yourself time to process your own emotions. Though you may have negative feelings toward your ex-spouse, it will be important not to express these to your child.

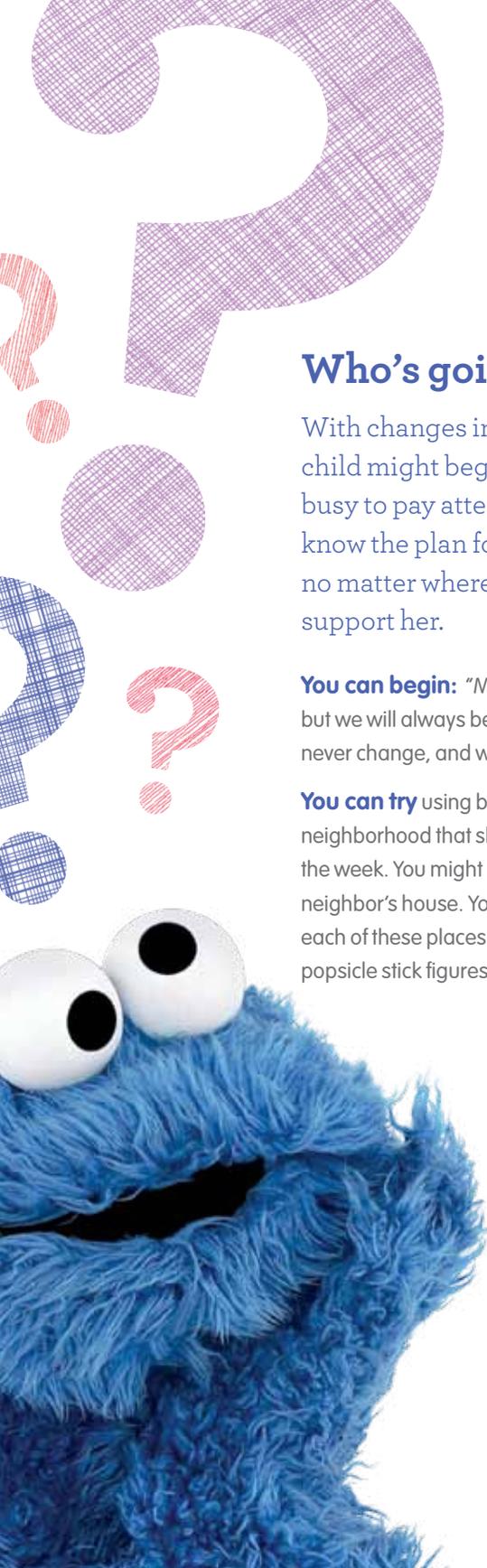
Who's going to take care of me?

With changes in routines and living arrangements, your child might begin to worry that everyone will be too busy to pay attention to her and take care of her. Let her know the plan for her new routines and reassure her that no matter where she is, someone will always be there to support her.

You can begin: "Mommy and Daddy might not live together anymore, but we will always be your mommy and daddy. No matter what, that will never change, and we will always take care of you."

You can try using blocks or other building materials to construct a little neighborhood that shows all the places your child goes throughout the week. You might stack blocks to represent your child's school or a neighbor's house. You can remind your child of the special people at each of these places who care about her by drawing pictures or making popsicle stick figures of them.

You don't have to know the answers to all of your child's questions right away. You can just explain that you are going to think about the question and will provide an answer as soon as you can.





Children have unique ways of understanding; an older child might be satisfied after hearing an answer to a question once, while a younger child might need to ask the same question again.

Will you get back together?

For many parents, this is a very uncomfortable question. Still, it is one that is important to clarify. If the answer to this question is “no,” communicate this. Giving your child false hope about the future will only make it harder for him to process change and make any necessary transitions. Answer honestly but without sharing negative specifics about why you will not get back together.

You can begin: “No, we are not going to get back together, but we will always be your mommy and daddy.”

You can try making up a special word or phrase that you will say each time you and your child see each other. Choose something that will remind both of you of the special bond that will always be yours.

*Does Elmo’s
mommy
love him?*

Will everything be different now?

With all the drastic changes from a divorce or separation, it might feel like everything will change. But from a child's point of view, certain routines can stay the same. Reminding your child of those simple, everyday activities gives her a sense of security.

You can begin: "I know a lot of things have been changing, but some of our routines will stay the same. You will always wake up in the morning and get dressed. You will eat breakfast, brush your teeth, and do your special helping job."

You can try taking photos of your child eating a meal, brushing her teeth, going to bed, getting dressed, and doing other daily routines. Place these pictures on a large piece of paper or throughout the house to remind your child of the things she can expect to happen each day.

No matter how challenging your divorce or separation may be, it is important that you as parents work together on behalf of your child's well-being. Though both of you may disagree on some things, you can agree to love your child.

Children want to be assured.



Simple questions about day-to-day activities can help you gauge how your child might be handling the divorce or separation. Encourage your child to close his eyes and to point to a place on this page. Together, read the question that he has landed on, and encourage him to answer. Take turns answering questions, and let this be the start of a conversation all about your days or weeks. If your child gives one-word answers, a simple "What else?" can really help get the conversation going!



What's your favorite word today?



What do you want to learn more about?



What good thing happened today?



If you could fly, where would you go?



What made you feel grouchy today?



What you eat for lunch today?



What makes you feel happy?



What do you want to do tomorrow?



Who did you play with today?



Are you worried about anything?



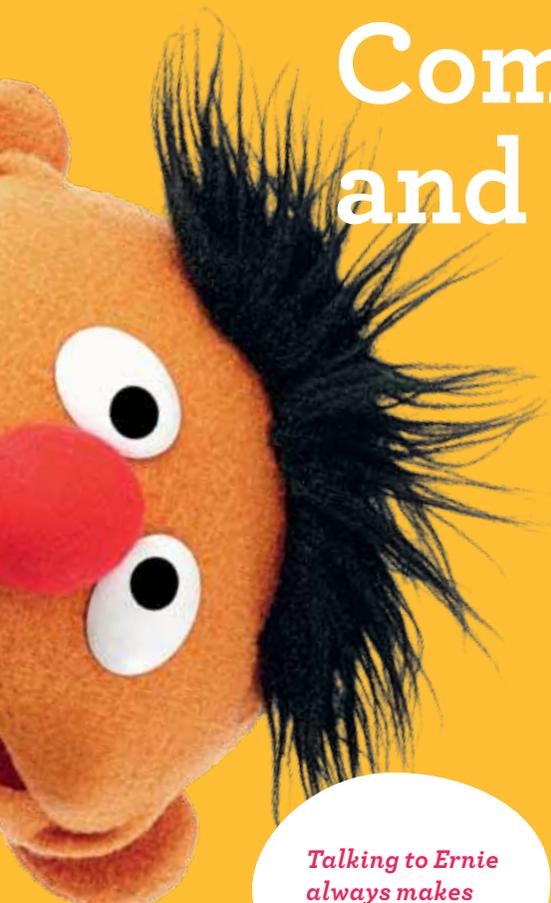
How are you feeling today?

Ask a question of your own!



Communicate and Connect

Happy, sad, worried, mad — you and your child are likely to feel many emotions as a result of your divorce or separation. Taking time to talk and just be together can help you work through any feelings that may come your way. In the following pages, you'll find strategies for expressing big feelings and connecting with others who can help.

A close-up of Ernie's face, showing his large red nose, wide eyes, and spiky black hair.

Talking to Ernie always makes me happy!

Cookiecaker, a small orange character with a striped shirt, is holding a pink-bordered photo of Big Bird.

It's OK to feel happy, even when difficult things happen.

Little Children, Big Feelings

For many children, having strong feelings can be confusing. Your child might want to stomp her feet when she is angry and also when she is frustrated. Helping your child to name her feelings can make them more manageable.

You can try making feeling faces. Pictures can be great tools to help you introduce your child to words that describe emotions. Work together to find pictures in magazines and cut out people who look confused, worried, joyful, proud, disappointed, or excited. Glue the pictures to a large piece of paper and label each one.

You can try playing emotional charades. Act out a feeling and ask your child to guess which one it is. If you are acting out "frustrated," you might furrow your brow and cross your arms. Now let her have a turn at acting.

You can try video chatting. When long distance is an issue, try to set up a time for your child to video chat with the parent who is far away. Seeing the parent's face, even if it is through the computer, will help your child feel comforted and connected.

We sometimes expect that some children, like military children, are used to a parent living far away. Separation from a parent due to divorce is very different and can trigger strong emotions. It's important that your child speaks to a caring grown-up about her feelings.



Honoring Your Emotions

Through a divorce or separation, you are setting new dreams and goals for yourself and for your changing family. This is a big emotional task that requires a lot of your time and energy.

No matter what your situation is, you can

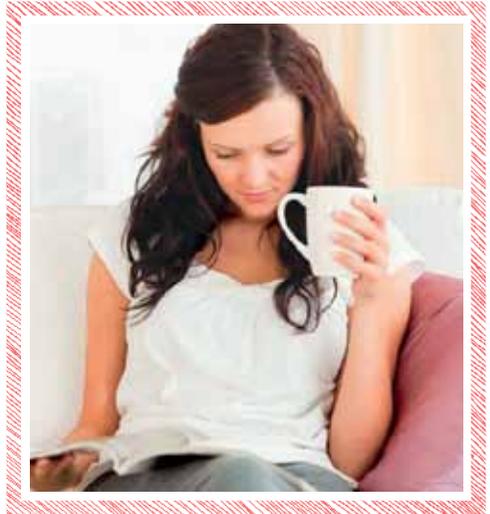
- ♥ go for a walk, or exercise to reduce stress,
- ♥ let someone know you need a hug, or
- ♥ cut out a picture that makes you feel good and keep it close at hand.

Even with limited time, you can

- ♥ take a few deep breaths,
- ♥ listen to a favorite song, or
- ♥ stretch your body.

If you occasionally have an empty house, you can

- ♥ make your favorite meal,
- ♥ write a letter,
- ♥ call or video chat with a friend,
- ♥ watch a movie,
- ♥ take an extra-long bath or shower,
- ♥ go to the park,
- ♥ take up an old hobby or start a new one, or
- ♥ read a book, newspaper, or magazine.



Reaching Out

You don't have to do this on your own. You can find support for yourself and for your child to help you move forward.

I always feel good when someone asks me for help. It's what being a friend is all about.

You are not alone.

Connect with family members and friends

Share your emotions with trusted friends and family and involve them with logistics. Is there anyone who can pick up your child after school or come over to help prepare dinner as you organize after a move?

Connect with your child's school

Let your child's teachers and school counselor know what is going on. Discuss any new routines, and ask them to share their own observations about your child. Find out what special support they may be able to offer your child during this challenging time.

Connect with support networks

Managing your own emotions is one of the most important ways you can help your child. Professionals, support groups, and religious or spiritual guides can offer a chance to share your feelings and can give you strategies for managing all the changes in your life.

Connect with legal professionals

It's important to consider your options when seeking legal advice. Make sure that you find a legal professional you trust or whom you are comfortable working with. This will make the divorce process easier on you and your family.



Blended Families

At one point, you might feel ready to share your lives with others again and your family could extend! Bringing two families together can be very exciting, but it may take time for blended families to grow close and get used to a new living arrangement. Your child will adjust if you give him the time that he needs to grow comfortable with the new family dynamic.



*We've grown
to be the best
of friends!*

*Relationships
develop at their
own pace.*

You can begin: “Though you may have a new stepdad and stepsister(s), the special relationship that you have with your dad will always be important and will never be replaced.”

New bonds won’t replace old ones: Let your child know that his stepparent is another person who cares about him. Reassure him that it is OK to like the stepparent; it will not mean that he loves his biological parent any less.

Game days: You can help your child embrace family changes by spending time all together. Physical games are a great way to help children feel comfortable and bond with one another. Scavenger hunts, tag, relay races, follow-the-leader, and hide-and-seek are just a few that you might try. Wait for your child to let you know that he is comfortable with his new stepparent and stepsiblings before they spend time together alone.



House rules: Everyone will come into a blended family having followed different sets of rules and routines. Work together to create a new set of rules for the household, and post them where everyone can see. You might ask everyone to contribute ideas for rules that will be important to creating “a happy and safe household.” Remember, not all of the rules need to be about things to avoid. Some can even be fun! For example, use a special phrase with family members when saying goodnight. As parents, know that you and your new spouse always have the final say about what rules are established.

General Information

[KidsHealth.org](#)

Includes articles for kids, teens, and parents on a wide range of topics such as divorce, living with a single parent, and living with stepparents. Click on "For Parents." Then type "Divorce" in the search tool.

[Family Mediation, Counseling, and Therapy](#)

[UpToParents.org](#)

Provides a free online mediation tool for parents going through a divorce or separation. Click on "Parents Corner."

[Locator.APA.org](#)

The American Psychological Association (APA) provides a free, online "Find a Psychologist" tool to help you locate a psychologist who is a member of the APA. Psychologists can provide therapy but cannot advise on medical issues.

[Therapists.PsychologyToday.com](#)

Psychology Today provides a free "Find a Therapist" tool that locates social workers, certified counselors, psychologists, and other professionals providing group and individual therapy.

Financial Assistance

[MyMoney.gov](#)

This U.S. Government website teaches financial basics and includes a section on divorce. Click on "Life Events." Then click on "Marriage/Divorce/Partners."



Legal Assistance

[Afcnet.org](#)

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts provides information on a range of common topics for families going through a divorce. Click on "Resource Center."

[FreeAdvice.com](#)

Provides free advice on dozens of topics including divorce law, child custody, child support, and spousal support. Click on "Legal Topics." Then click on "Divorce."

[Family.FindLaw.com](#)

Features in-depth information on a range of topics related to divorce. Click on "Divorce."

[LSC.gov](#)

Legal Services Corporation provides free or low-cost legal aid for low-income Americans. Select your state and county under "Find Legal Aid."

Recommended Reading

By Robert Emery, Ph.D.: *The Truth about Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Thrive*

By JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D., M.Ed.: *Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies for Helping Children Thrive Through Divorce*



“In time, things will get easier.”

Through good times and bad, trust that you and your child will continue to create and celebrate new paths, and build a sense of emotional resilience that can last a lifetime.



“You are strong.”

“I know you have lots of questions. I bet you even have a question for every finger on your hand.”



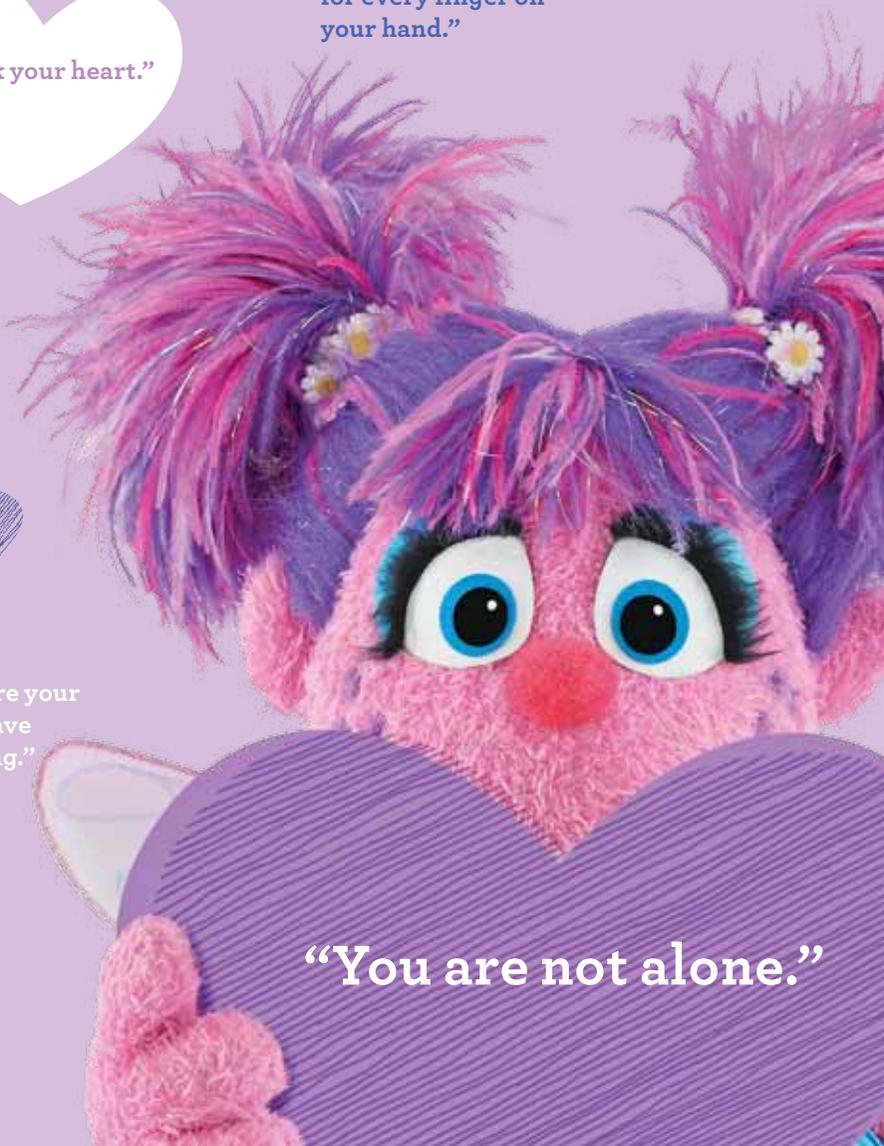
“Speak your heart.”



“You can always ask.”



“Your feelings are your feelings — to have them isn’t wrong.”



“You will be taken care of.”

“You are not alone.”

For more Sesame Street resources on divorce:

-  Explore [sesamestreet.org/divorce](https://www.sesamestreet.org/divorce)
-  Connect with [facebook.com/sesamestreetincommunities](https://www.facebook.com/sesamestreetincommunities)
-  Download the FREE Sesame Street divorce app

Give us your feedback at:
[sesamestreet.org/divorce/feedback](https://www.sesamestreet.org/divorce/feedback)