

Adoption and Divorce

By Jean MacLeod

Divorce isn't the ending that any parent envisions when they begin the journey to adopt. In addition to the normal stress of a dissolved relationship, a parent may feel extra guilt over inflicting an additional trauma on a child with a history of adoption losses. How you handle yourself during the process of divorce can mitigate some of the guilt: recognize that when a parent chooses to demonstrate a "good" ending to a bad situation, it can set an incredibly important example.

Whether a couple's divorce is amicable or acrimonious, a child needs to be guided through his own pain, fear and confusion. When a parent is able to display emotional leadership, and implement a family emotional-behavioral plan to weather the upheaval of divorce, it teaches an adoptee that there *is* life-after-loss. Ask yourself:

- 1) What is your behavior modeling for your children? How are you "teaching" them to handle adversity / sadness / anger?
- 2) Are you expressing YOUR feelings in a healthy way?
- 3) Are you age-appropriately HONEST with your kids about your divorce? Do you answer (or bring up) questions in a straightforward manner, without getting overly upset?
- 4) Do your children truly understand that THEY had nothing to do with YOUR divorce?
- 5) Are you allowing your children to mourn the loss of "how life was" with two parents (even if the ex-spouse was less-than-perfect)?
- 6) Do you give spoken/unspoken permission to your children to love their other parent, and do you reinforce that relationship?
- 7) Do you validate your children's emotions?
- 8) Are you showing them how, in spite of divorce-loss, to be happy?
- 9) Are you allowing guilt over divorcing one of your child's parents to immobilize your good parenting (are you able to confidently set boundaries, and enforce house rules)?
- 10) Can you put your adopted children's emotional needs as your HIGH PRIORITY over everything else, for at least the year after your divorce?

In addition:

- ◆ **Understand that you and your spouse are the marriage role models that your children internalize and replicate.** Divorce is a sad solution, but worse, is staying in a bad / sad / mad marriage and allowing your children to understand your negative relationship with your spouse as “normal”. Your marital relationship could become THEIR family structure as adults.
- ◆ **You *cannot* be the parent you need to be for your adopted children IF YOU ARE CHRONICALLY UNHAPPY or in a dysfunctional relationship.** Simply: get help or get out.
- ◆ **Avoid building a loving, fantasy parent out of an absent-by-choice ex-spouse.** You don’t want your child to be hurt by a parent who shows little interest in visitation or who “abandons” your son or daughter, but it is better to place an honest, *non-denigrating* explanation where it belongs (on the absent parent’s personal problems, or sad choices, for example), and to help your child deal with this loss upfront. Covering for an ex-spouse in order to protect your kids’ feelings will eventually backlash at YOU.

For help with tough questions from your kids, check out:

Difficult Questions Kids Ask [and are too afraid to ask] About Divorce

by Meg F. Schneider and Joan Zuckerberg Ph.D. (Simon & Schuster / Fireside 1996)

- ◆ **Normalize therapy for your kids:** Therapists are ‘Feelings Doctors’ and we all could use a tune-up. If you are seeing a marriage counselor or individual therapist, tell your kids in a serious, but matter-of-fact manner. Talk about why smart people seek help. Your normalizing therapy as a healthy choice will go a long way in helping your child see a counselor, if it is indicated.
- ◆ **Divorce will trigger an adopted child’s loss issues.** It is an opportunity to identify and talk about the core issue of loss, validate feelings, offer empathy, and help build your child’s resilience with coping skills. An adopted child’s awareness of his feeling that divorce = abandonment, and WHY he feels the way he does, is a huge step toward him being able to successfully deal with the stress of this major life change.

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## Divorce Resources for Parents

### **Divorce After Adoption: Practical Tips for Parents**

<http://www.adopting.org/adoptions/divorce-after-adoption-practical-tips-for-parents.html>

### **Books about Divorce for Adults, Teens and Children**

[www.divorce-books.com](http://www.divorce-books.com)

## *Putting Kids First*

*“Through the process of adoption, our children lost birthparents and an extended family of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and even siblings. Internationally adopted children lost their birth country, birth culture, racial identity and language. Some of our daughters and sons lost orphanage caretakers that they cared about, others lost foster families that they had loved and lived with since birth.” ~ Jean MacLeod*

Divorce, always a stressful event, may impact an unsupported adoptee on the nuclear-explosion level. How can parents make a necessary transition less traumatic? *We can realize that the extra layers of adoption require extra-care parenting in divorce.* Silverstein and Kaplan-Roszia identified the ‘Seven Core Issues in Adoption’: Loss, Rejection, Guilt / Shame, Grief, Identity, Intimacy, Mastery / Control. These same issues may be activated in all children during a divorce, but they are especially impactful in adoptees who have sustained other early-life losses, and who have experienced life-changing events out of their own control. Parental awareness of an adoptee’s multi-layered emotional needs may help the child weather the divorce, and may help the entire family through divorce’s aftershock.

### **HELPING ADOPTED CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE-LOSS**

*Helping Children Cope with Loss and Separation*  
by Claudia Jewett Jarratt

*When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal With Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses*  
by John W. James and Russell Friedman

### **Favorite Books about Divorce for Children**

***Help! A Girl’s Guide to Divorce and Stepfamilies*** (American Girl Library)  
by Nancy Holyoke

***Dinosaurs Divorce*** by Mac Brown & Laurie Krasny Brown

***Let’s Talk About It: Divorce*** by Fred Rogers

***It’s Not Your Fault, Koko Bear*** by Vicky Lansky

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