



DIVORCE

Guide for Teens



DIVORCE GUIDE FOR TEENAGERS

Introduction

You hear the words “we’re getting a divorce.” What does this mean for you? Your parents are separating, no longer living together and agreeing to no longer be married. They will sign legal papers that will make them single again. You must remember it is NOT your fault. Your parents still love you and they are not divorcing you. They are taking this action to prevent further conflict and produce a more stable environment for you.

Is what I am feeling normal?

You may experience a wide range of emotions:

- Relief or a sense of calm. Some experience relief because the divorce may mean the end of years of fighting between parents.
- Grief and Sadness. It is okay to be sad about the divorce.
- Upset and Confused. For some, divorce may come as a shock.
- Guilt. You may feel like the divorce is your fault. Remember, it is not your fault.
- Anger. After the initial shock wears off, you may feel anger. It is important to express anger in a healthy way. Violence or self-harm is never the answer.
- Worried or Anxious. It is natural to feel anxious or worried about the future. You are experiencing something you have never experienced before.

Whatever you are feeling, it is important to express your feelings in a healthy way.

- Talk to your parents, your siblings and trusted friends that have experienced a divorce.
- Talk to your guidance counselor.
- Continue to participate in activities you enjoy, such as exercising and playing sports.
- Write about your feelings by keeping a journal or diary.
- If you are creative: write a song, a poem, sculpt, dance, etc.

Know that you are not alone.

THE PROCESS

What is a Petition for Divorce?

When parents are married, they are required by law to go through the divorce process to end their marriage. Your parents will go to a court to divide property, dissolve the marriage, but most importantly, develop a parenting plan outlining conservatorship of you/siblings, visitation, child support and medical support.

What is a Petition in Suit Affecting the Parent-Child Relationship?

When parents are not married, they will have a court proceeding called a Suit Affecting the Parent-Child Relationship (SAPCR). Much like a divorce, a SAPCR is a court case that asks a judge to order conservatorship, visitation, child support and medical support for a child/the children.

What happens at Court?

There are times when your parents have to go to court and request that the Judge make decisions for them because they may not be able reach an agreement. The Judge presides over the case. If your parents are represented by lawyers, each parent's attorney will present his or her desired outcome. They may present evidence and have witnesses testify.

Teens do not usually have to go to court, but there are times when the Judge may want to meet with you to determine what would be best for you. If you are the age of 12 or older, the Judge may ask you which parent you would like to live with and why. The Judge will likely consider your preference if the Judge considers you sufficiently mature. He/she will also evaluate whether either parent has unfairly influenced your stated preference. There may also be a Guardian Ad Litem or Attorney Ad Litem appointed to help the Judge understand what is best for you or tell the Judge what you want.

COMMON TERMINOLOGY

What is Conservatorship?

Conservatorship is what most people call custody. In Texas, conservatorship describes the rights and duties of a parent. Conservatorship can be sole, joint or a mixture of both. If one parent is **sole managing conservator**, that parent will make decisions that relate to you by themselves. If your parents are **joint managing conservators**, your parents will make decisions that relate to you together. However, even when your parents are joint managing conservators, one parent may retain the exclusive right to make certain decisions, such as determining your primary residence.

A term you may also see is **possessory conservator**. You often see this term when one parent is named sole managing conservator. The possessory conservator has the same basic rights, duties and responsibilities of every parent, but does not get to make major decisions about you such as where you live or where you will attend school.

What is Possession and Access?

Possession and access is the portion of the parenting plan that outlines the schedule for when you will be with each parent. Your parents may jointly develop a schedule that they feel works best for you to spend time with each parent. If your parents cannot come to an agreement, the court will decide what is in your best interest.

If you have siblings, you will most likely stay together. Courts are generally opposed to splitting up siblings. The trauma of the divorce is a lot for a child to deal with, thus separating siblings is often seen as an added and unnecessary cruelty.

As discussed before, if you are 12 and older, a court will consider your preference on which home you would like to be your primary residence if the court finds it is in your best interest.

What is Child Support?

Generally, the parent that has “custody” will receive child support and medical support payments from the other parent. This money is generally paid through a system provided by the state of Texas. You do not receive the money directly. It goes to the parent with “custody.”

ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

Help, I am caught in the middle.

There are times when you may feel caught in the middle. For example, one parent may ask you to deliver messages to the other parent, ask you to keep secrets from the other parent or say mean things about the other parent to you. What should you do?

- Ask them to stop. They may not be aware of what they are doing and will stop.
- Let them know it makes you uncomfortable and it is unfair to involve you in their problems.
- If it is too hard for you to tell them directly, try writing them a letter. Explain you love them both and will not choose between them.
- Ask if you can see a counselor. Your counselor can work with you and your parents to minimize the conflict.

Do I have to go for visits?

It is important to maintain healthy relationships with both parents. However, as a teen you may become very active in extracurricular activities and building relationships with your friends. You may get a job and have to work a certain schedule. The best thing to do is communicate with your parents. Let them know what is important to you and ask that they take your wishes into consideration. Your parents want to be involved in your life. If you have a sporting match on a weekend when you would normally visit the other parent, invite them to the match. If you are worried about both parents being there together, try inviting one parent to the first half and the other parent to the second half.

If it feels like one parent is forcing you to visit the other parent, try to remember that there is a court order in place that requires them to encourage you to spend time with the other parent. The best thing you can do is try to keep the lines of communication open with **both** parents.

Holidays and Celebrations

When parents first divorce, holidays and special occasions like your birthday can be difficult. Luckily, there are many ways to deal with it. If you are missing former family traditions, try creating new ones that you can share with each parent. If you do not like the idea of celebrating your birthday twice, try alternating years: celebrate with one parent in odd-numbered years and with the other parent in even-numbered years.

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