

# Adolescence, Teens and Divorce: How to Get Through — Part One

March 1, 2017/by [Jenny Psaki](#)



**Question:** I am the parent of teenagers. Their father and I are beginning the divorce process. Everyone's emotions are running high in the house. How do I know if my kids' reactions are due to the divorce or to normal adolescence? What can I do to prevent the adverse effects of the divorce on my children?

**Response:** Parenting a teen can be challenging even in the best of times. It's a harder task during a divorce. Twenty percent of teens do not fully recover from their parents' divorce without emotional scars. Of that twenty percent, about one third continue to struggle 5 years post-divorce.

So what can parents do to help get their teens through two of the most challenging transitions in their life: divorce and adolescence?

Adolescent years are about development and growth. Physical, emotional and behavioral changes all occur at a time when the demands of school, family and community may be simultaneously "ramped up." Add to the mix, family transitions and structural changes that accompany a divorce, and that's a pressure cooker.

Adolescence is a time of "identity formation." Teens want to become independent, separating themselves from others including their own family. For most teens, this is a powerful urge driving them toward maturity. Sometimes, however, teens engage in "at-risk" behaviors while not fully understanding the social, emotional or legal consequences of such behaviors.

Teens living with two parents, who set rules and boundaries in the home, see their parents as role models. During a divorce a teen may begin to distrust his knowledge of relationships, love, and security. They may begin to distrust their parents as role models. This can become a very confusing, frustrating and depressing experience.

When divorce occurs during adolescence, the teen may see one parent leave the home and the teen may feel abandoned. Others experience the parent's departure as a reason to mature since both parents are no longer around to take care of him/her.

Some teens feel worried or anxious about the stability of the family after the divorce. The teen may feel obligated to take charge of the household and assume adult responsibilities, especially if there are younger siblings or the teen becomes the caretaker for an abandoned parent or a parent suffering from addiction or depression.

These teens become "parentified" and become overburdened with emotional and/or physical responsibilities which he/she is not capable of handling. These teens miss out on appropriate developmental

experiences like hanging out with friends, dating, sports involvement or maintaining a part-time job.

Divorce can make a teen feel like the “rug he has been pulled out from underneath.” The values of “family” and “stability” have changed. The lack of “parent-promised” security can prompt feelings such as depression, anger, tears, anxiety or frustration and risk-taking behaviors such as sexual promiscuity, vulnerability to domestic violence and delinquency. If any of these behaviors arise, the teen may benefit from professional counseling.

Parents can take proactive steps to promote positive youth development and teen resiliency by encouraging and building upon the teen’s innate emotional and physical strengths. Both parents should remain involved in the teen’s daily activities, interests and school if appropriate. Consistent and frequent contact with both parents is important as long as it is safe.

Parents who work together for the benefit of their children can help a teen recover from the divorce. Parents can use the services of a mediator, an advocate, attorneys or each other to develop a carefully constructed, “teen-friendly” parenting schedule that provides for predictable opportunities for the teen to be cared for by both parents. The parents must consider the teen’s personality, her developmental stage as well as extra-curricular activities and responsibilities for the teen to maintain during and after the divorce.

Parents should be mindful of their own household rules and behavioral expectations for the teen. Consistency between the parents in the areas of boundary setting and parenting style can be comforting to some teens. A social life separate from family is also important to a teen and helps with development. A healthy and safe social life can help a teen to judge character in others and seek out positive role models. Parents should permit their teens to have a balance between time with friends and time with family.

It is important for parents to remember that their role before, during and after the divorce requires setting structure and respectful limits for their teens in order for the young person to experience the best outcome possible after the divorce.

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