



Children's Ages and Stages: Information for Co-Parents

Children process information about their parents and their parents' relationships in different ways at different times in their lives. Children's emotional, physical, and mental growth changes how they can receive information and develop into healthy adults. The following will help you think about how best to communicate with your child during your family transition.



Toddlers & Preschoolers

Ages 2-5

It is common for children in this age group to feel guilty about a separation and attribute it to their naughty behavior. This age group needs frequent affirmations and should be told that it is okay to love stepparents and be part of two families. They also need to know it is okay to love both parents and be part of two families.

Children in this age group tend to adapt well to spending time in two households but may need you to remind them of what is happening and that they are loved. For example, "Both of us love you so much that we want to spend time with you, and that is why you are going to your other parent's house this weekend."

TRY THIS

- Be sensitive to their feelings.
- Listen to them.
- Frequently reassure them of your love and continued presence in their lives.

AVOID THIS

Avoid making preschoolers (or any child) choose between parents or families! This act alone can have a long-lasting and damaging effect on your child's emotional development.

Elementary-Age or Pre-Adolescents

Ages 6-10

Elementary school-age children may feel guilty when their parents separate, and this can lead to lack of attention in school and bad behavior. This age group may still hold out hope that their parents will get back together and can struggle when parents find new partners.

TRY THIS

- Give them more say in their personal lives, such as clothes, hairstyles, and how they decorate their rooms.
- Offer opportunities to talk about feelings.
- Let them know you understand their feelings of loss and grief.

AVOID THIS

Avoid being boundary-less. Children still need guidance on keeping their rooms neat and following school rules about dress and appearance.

Preteens

Ages 11-12

Adolescence is the time when children begin to test their independence and sense of self. This important process for children can also lead to conflict in stepfamilies. Preteens may choose to focus their angst and resentment on stepparents.

TRY THIS

Focus on decision-making skills rather than on making decisions for this age group. Help them think about benefits and consequences for their behavior. Find focused one-on-one time to remind them that they are loved. Support their exploration of new hobbies and interests.

AVOID THIS

Conflict is unpleasant, but it is part of the growing up process for preteens. Don't shy away from contact because you are uncomfortable with conflict.

Teens

Ages 13-18

Teens develop complicated feelings about their own identities, sexualities, values, and relationships. They may be uncomfortable and project some of their feelings onto their parents, particularly if they remarry or start to date. Teens may also have a love-hate relationship with some of the responsibilities they have. Those responsibilities might include decision-making about family finances or watching over younger siblings.

TRY THIS

- Support your teen's ongoing emotional development and opinions about what they think is best for them. Consult them about where they might like to spend their time and be flexible with your co-parent as things shift.
- Maintain open and honest communication, which will help teens realize they are still loved and valued.
- Help teens identify which responsibilities they are able and willing to take on. Some teens might also welcome giving up some adult responsibilities. This will give them more time to pursue worthwhile activities of their own choice.

AVOID THIS

Though you might start to talk to your teen like they are an adult, avoid developing a friendship or peer relationship with your child.

Information has been adapted from <https://extension.umn.edu/divorce-and-other-family-transitions/how-age-affects-childrens-adjustment-stepfamilies>

UW-Madison Division of Extension offers co-parenting courses and support for families in caring for each other in ways that promote growth and understanding. For more information about these courses, contact your county Extension educator or visit <https://extension.wisc.edu/family/>.