

Divorce Alert: Tuning In To Your Child's Feelings

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Below is a checklist of feelings a child typically experiences when facing their parent's divorce. Review it yourself first and then use it as a springboard for discussion with your child. This list was compiled by Dr. Paul Wanio, one of the psychotherapists who has contributed to the book, "How Do I Tell the Kids about the Divorce?" Dr. Wanio suggests, "Even if your child is reluctant to admit to some of the feelings listed, you can say, "Okay, but if you did ever feel like that, I could understand it, and it would be okay for us to talk about ... okay?" He says you can also ask, "Do you ever feel angry with me? Well, I can understand it if you do and I still love you even when you're angry. Do you ever worry about...?"

Review the checklist to identify troubling issues, clarify misconceptions and reassure your child that he/she is loved, cared for, not at fault, and that things will work out.

Go over each category without presuming you already know how your child will respond. Check any items that your child is currently experiencing, that you would like to come back to, or that you would like your former spouse to take note of and discuss. (Some of these may also apply to yourself.)

If you find that some of these questions are difficult to answer or that you can't seem to find the right words, be sure to contact a psychotherapist, coach, mental health or religious counselor. Just one visit can be extremely helpful in assisting you to find the support, strength and appropriate words in answering your child. You both deserve answers.

___ **SHOCK AND DENIAL:** "It can't be happening."

___ **ANGER:** "How could you do this to me?"

___ **DEPRESSION AND DESPAIR:** "There's no hope, no future, no love, no answers."

___ **EMBARRASSMENT:** "What will others think? Something is wrong with me and/or my family."

___ **GUILT:** "It's my fault; I'm to blame."

___ **SELF-BLAME:** "You're an adult so you must be right and I must be wrong (bad); you can do no wrong -- after all, you're Mommy/Daddy!; one of my parents left (me) so I must be bad; God is punishing me for being bad." **NO CONTROL, HELPLESSNESS, AFRAID AND INSECURE:** "What will I do; where will I live; who do I choose between; why is this happening; who can I trust; how does love turn to hate; will I lose both my Mom and my Dad; what becomes of me; who is in charge; who has the answers; who IS the adult or parent around here anyway; what will happen?"

___ **ALONE, MISUNDERSTOOD AND CONFUSED:** "I didn't mean to wet the bed; I don't know why I hit Tommy; I didn't mean to yell at you; I don't know why I said I hate you; I don't know why I don't know why; I'm not trying to be mean; I don't know why I'm so quiet either."

____ **VULNERABLE AND UNPROTECTED:** "If you can leave each other -- a once impossible notion -- maybe you can leave me too; I'm afraid when you leave me alone; will you come back; who will take care of me; who will take care of you; how will we live; if Mom and Dad can't seem to help themselves, how can they help me?"

____ **RELUCTANCE TO EXPRESS FEELINGS:** "If I tell you how I really feel, will you still love me; will you think I'm taking sides; will you think I don't love you; will my feelings make you go away or hate me or not want me; will I hurt YOUR feelings terribly?"

____ **DEEP SADNESS:** "I've lost my own Mom/Dad; I've lost a part of myself, my family, my world, and nothing can fill up that 'hole' ever again."

____ **BETRAYAL:** "MY parents actually have done the unthinkable. They have gone against the unwritten (and written) universal code to always stay together and take care of their child... me. How could they?"