

TIPS FOR PARENTS: KIDS GOING BACK TO SCHOOL ... AFTER DIVORCE

Many divorces take place during the summer. This timing can help families adapt to the changes ahead. But it also makes returning to school a challenge for most children. Fortunately, there are ways to ease the transition by tapping into the many resources available through the school. That's why it's wise to develop a cooperative relationship with key school personnel.

Let the School Know

Start by informing your child's teachers about the divorce and any changes in your home environment. The more aware they are, the better prepared they can be to help your child. After all, school is often a second home for children; that should be a comfort to them during this time of transition.

We can't expect children to not be affected by the divorce. So expect raw emotions to come to the surface, including fear, shame, guilt and many forms of insecurity. Be aware that these complex feelings are likely to affect a child's focus and self-esteem, as well as relationships with their friends, not to mention the impact on their academic performance.

Take advantage of the fact that most children trust and feel safe with their teachers. So schedule a conversation with them before the school year starts. Discuss the status of your post-divorce arrangements. Having the teacher as an ally can help your child feel more secure and less alone.

Things You Can Do

The following suggestions can guide parents in using the school's resources to your child's advantage:

- **Value the skills of their teachers.** Being compassionate by nature, teachers can look for signs of distress or depression in your child. They can talk with your child about their feelings. They can let your child know they are not the blame, nor are they the only kids at school going through these difficulties. Messages like this can reinforce prior conversations you've already had with your child. It also reassures them that the divorce is not a big dark secret. It can be discussed candidly without shame.
- **Talk with your child's guidance counselor.** These professionals are trained to handle challenging circumstances. They can be an ally to you and your children and counted on for support and guidance.
- **View educators as members of your child's whole support team.** They have the background to detect signs of depression, aggression or other behavior changes that need to be addressed with you as soon as possible. So ask them to be attentive toward your child.
- **Take advantage of school divorce support groups.** These groups are designed to encourage children to talk with one another and share their feelings during or after the divorce. It's helpful to know they're not alone, that they're accepted, and that others are facing or have experienced similar life-altering circumstances. That awareness gives children a sense of belonging. Many children make new friends with others who are sharing their experiences. The less alone a child feels, the easier it is to accept the challenges they will be facing in the weeks and months to come.

Of course, schools cannot replace parental responsibilities. It's essential to talk to your child before they return to school. Prepare them for changes in routine or scheduling ahead. Inform them about who they can talk to at school if they are feeling sad or have questions about adjusting to new situations. Let school be your child's best friend at this time. It can be a great support system for your family if you take advantage of the experience and useful resources available.