



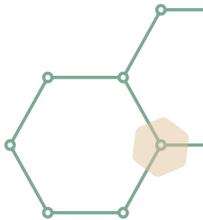
# How children react at different ages and stages

Every child is unique and will react to separation or divorce differently. How your child reacts can depend on:

- your child's personality and temperament (for example, at pickup and drop-off some children find it easier to separate from an adult than other children do)
- your family's history
- your child's circle of friends, school environment, community

Research tells us that a child's age and stage of development is an important factor in how they react to their parents' separation or divorce. This section provides some information about how children may react at different ages and stages.

You will also find information about how children handle separation and divorce at different ages and stages, in [Because Life Goes On . . . Helping Children and Youth Live with Separation and Divorce](#).



## Key factors for all ages

No matter your children's ages, though, there are three things that are important for them:

- **Reduce conflict with the other parent.** If conflict does continue, protect your children from it.
  - For example, don't say negative things about the other parent to your children.
  - For younger children it is important to remember that just because your child doesn't understand the words, doesn't mean that conflict won't affect them.
- **Given that single parenting has different challenges, focus on strengthening your parenting skills.**
- **Provide your children with both support for and the opportunity to have a relationship with the other parent.**

Try to find effective ways to communicate with the other parent about what is going on in your children's life. For example, you may try to communicate through conversations or e-mail. Effective communication can help make sure that your children don't "play" one of you off the other. In addition, because of the challenges facing teenagers, it is particularly important to be aware of what is going on in their lives.

You may have questions about your children's reaction to your separation or divorce. You or your children may find it helpful to speak to a counsellor, elder or religious advisor. This can help you to decide if there are any big issues you should be worried about, and if you need to get your children extra help.

## Infants and Toddlers: Birth to age 2

At this age your child depends on you for their physical and emotional needs. Your child's attachment to caregivers and other significant people in their life is important to their healthy emotional and psychological development.

Infants and toddlers have a limited understanding of their world. They will not understand that you're separating or divorcing. But they will feel it when you're upset or in conflict, and they will react to this. Their early experiences can influence them later in life.

Infants and toddlers need predictable caregiving and routines. They need nurturing and emotional connections with you and other caregivers. Routines may not be exactly the same in each home, but the more predictability there is for children, the easier things will be for them.

What you should watch for in your infant or toddler:

- problems with sleeping, eating, toilet training
- delays in development or temporary setbacks from milestones already reached (for example, in development of language skills) clinginess or difficulty in separating from you, or withdrawal from social interaction
- crying, irritability, tantrums

How to help your infant or toddler:

- reassure your child that you love them and that you will always take care of them
- ask caregivers to let you know if they notice changes in your child
- introduce any changes to routines as gradually as possible

## Preschoolers: Ages 3 to 5

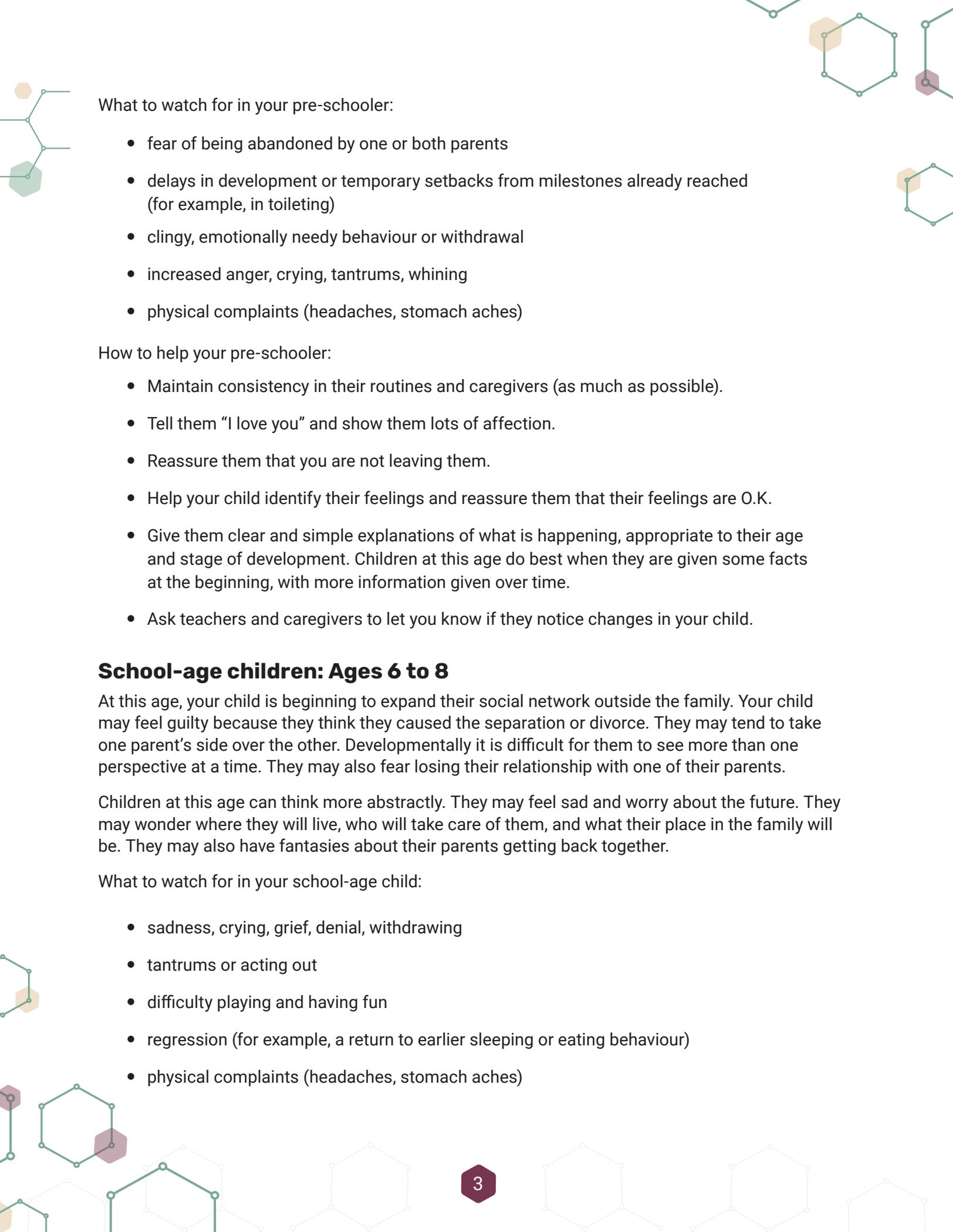
At this age, your child is growing very quickly both physically and emotionally. But they may not yet understand separation or divorce.

Children at this age see themselves as the "center" of the universe. They believe that they have control over, or are the cause of, what happens around them. Because of this, they may believe that the separation or divorce is their fault. They may believe they caused their parent's sadness.

At this age, children begin to develop a separate relationship with each of their parents.

Preschoolers can't always tell the difference between what's real and what's imaginary. So, they can be confused about what is happening. They may believe that Mom or Dad is leaving *them*.

At this stage, children can generally deal with more changes to their physical and social environment than infants, but they still need predictability.



What to watch for in your pre-schooler:

- fear of being abandoned by one or both parents
- delays in development or temporary setbacks from milestones already reached (for example, in toileting)
- clingy, emotionally needy behaviour or withdrawal
- increased anger, crying, tantrums, whining
- physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches)

How to help your pre-schooler:

- Maintain consistency in their routines and caregivers (as much as possible).
- Tell them “I love you” and show them lots of affection.
- Reassure them that you are not leaving them.
- Help your child identify their feelings and reassure them that their feelings are O.K.
- Give them clear and simple explanations of what is happening, appropriate to their age and stage of development. Children at this age do best when they are given some facts at the beginning, with more information given over time.
- Ask teachers and caregivers to let you know if they notice changes in your child.

## **School-age children: Ages 6 to 8**

At this age, your child is beginning to expand their social network outside the family. Your child may feel guilty because they think they caused the separation or divorce. They may tend to take one parent’s side over the other. Developmentally it is difficult for them to see more than one perspective at a time. They may also fear losing their relationship with one of their parents.

Children at this age can think more abstractly. They may feel sad and worry about the future. They may wonder where they will live, who will take care of them, and what their place in the family will be. They may also have fantasies about their parents getting back together.

What to watch for in your school-age child:

- sadness, crying, grief, denial, withdrawing
- tantrums or acting out
- difficulty playing and having fun
- regression (for example, a return to earlier sleeping or eating behaviour)
- physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches)

- fear of losing an absent parent
- feeling loyalty conflicts

How to help your school-age child:

- Tell your child that you still love them and will always take care of them.
- Reassure them that they have not done anything wrong and that there is nothing they can do to get their parents back together.
- Ask teachers and caregivers to let you know if they notice changes in your child.
- Give them information appropriate to their age and stage of development about what will change (for example, where they will live, arrangements for time with each parent, any changes to their routine).
- Let them know that their perspective is important, but that the parents will make the decisions.
- Give them opportunities to talk about how they are feeling.
- Give them opportunities to hear about other children who have gone through separation and divorce.

## **Pre-teens: Ages 9 to 12**

Your pre-teen is becoming more independent. They are focusing more on their friends and the world outside their family. But they still need their family for emotional support and guidance.

Pre-teens are able to see the separation or divorce as an adult issue, but they may still be angry with their parents. They often see the world in absolutes – black or white, good or bad, right or wrong.

Pre-teens may react in different ways. They may:

- feel torn between their parents, or
- try very hard to maintain good relationships with both parents, or
- be angry and hostile to one or both parents

Pre-teens want to be treated like adults. When you're going through a stressful time, you may be tempted to treat your child as your friend and rely on them for support. While pre-teens may want to play this role, it's not appropriate for them to take on this level of responsibility. In the long term, this can cause them emotional problems.

What to watch for in your pre-teen:

- social withdrawal, difficulty with peers, becoming involved with a new peer group
- strong anger or aggression
- physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches)

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- shame or embarrassment about the separation or divorce
  - blaming a parent they believe caused the divorce
  - trying to “take care of” the parent who they believe is more vulnerable
  - taking on too many responsibilities (for example, acting like a “parent”)

How to help your pre-teen:

- Listen to your pre-teen’s feelings and concerns—try to stay open-minded and don’t judge.
- Don’t lean on your pre-teen for emotional support.
- Don’t give your child responsibilities that are inappropriate to their age and stage of development (for example, too many childcare or household responsibilities).

## Teenagers: Ages 13 to 19

Your teenager is becoming more independent. They identify more with their peers. They’re forming an identity that is separate from their family. The teen years can also be confusing for them as they adapt to physical and social changes. They need lots of emotional support from their family.

Teenagers may feel a range of emotions about the separation and divorce. They may be surprised that it’s actually happening or they may feel angry that their parents “couldn’t try harder.”

Some teenagers may be in their first dating relationship. If not, they may be thinking more about dating. Their parents’ separation or divorce may cause them worry or anxiety. They may be wondering if:

- relationships are worth the trouble if they aren’t going to work out anyway
- their relationships will fail
- they should trust someone enough to be in a relationship with them

If your teenager already has a difficult relationship with you or the other parent, it’s possible that the separation or divorce can make the conflict worse.

Your teenager may have very concrete worries about how the separation or divorce will affect them. They may wonder how much support, including financial support, you’ll be able to offer. They may wonder how their schedule will change. Friendships are important to them, so they may worry they will have to change schools. They may also worry that they won’t have much time for friends or activities.

It’s really important to listen to your teenager’s views about new schedules. But don’t put them in the middle of any conflict between you and the other parent about this or any other issue.



What to watch for in your teenager:

- anger, avoidance, shame, sadness
- depression or sadness
- changes in sleep patterns
- grief reactions
- significant changes in behaviour
- acting out through sex, crime, drugs
- feeling pressured or hurried to become more independent
- worries about relationships
- changes in their attendance, behaviour or performance at school

How to help your teenager:

- Provide opportunities for your teen to talk about their emotions, concerns, complaints.
- Discuss the practical issues (for example, changes to routines, living arrangements) honestly and directly with your teen.
- Allow your teen to provide input into their schedule—make them part of the discussion; remind them, however, that the parents will make the decisions.
- Adjust to their schedule—teens have a lot of demands on their time.
- Don't lean on your teen for emotional support.
- Don't put your teen in the middle of your conflict with the other parent.
- Support your teen's appropriate friendships and peer activities but have clear expectations and limits.