

## Back-to-School Poses Extra Challenges When Parents Separated or Divorced Over the Summer Vacation

*Returning to school after summer vacation can be difficult at the best of times, but it poses additional challenges for children if a separation or divorce occurred over the holidays. Here's advice to help your children answer questions from schoolmates – and how to know when to seek professional help for your child.*



Going back to school is always a stressful time for children and parents; some greet it with joyful excitement, while others are anxious and depressed when the summer holidays are over. This is true for all families – but when there has been a separation or divorce over the summer, children can be especially anxious about returning to school. What are they going to tell their friends? Their teachers? If children believe the divorce was their fault – and most children do, until repeated reassurance convinces them they're blameless – they may be experiencing feelings of guilt as well as sadness.

“Make a plan with the children about how to answer questions about the separation or divorce,” advises Diana Shepherd, *Divorce Magazine*'s Editorial Director. “Let them know that they may be facing a lot of questions from curious schoolmates, and let them know that it's okay to politely decline to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable.” Parents can coach their children about how to politely deflect intensely personal questions as well as discuss what would be appropriate to share with friends and acquaintances.

Children may be anxious to know whether they'll still be attending the same school, or whether they'll have to change schools because of a change in residence after the separation or divorce. “If the parent with primary physical custody has moved to a new school district, he or she should reassure the kids that they'll still be able to see their old friends – and then make sure to keep that promise,” says Shepherd.

According to experts, it usually takes about a year for children to come to terms with their parents' divorce. This doesn't mean that they are no longer experiencing any feelings of sadness or anger, but they should be coping well with those feelings by the end of the first year after the divorce.

One bad grade or schoolyard scuffle aren't reasons for parents to panic; these incidents may or may not have anything to do with the separation or divorce. Unless a child's adjustment problems are really severe, parents should give their kids at least six months to a year to deal with his/her feelings of loss due to the divorce.

However, parents should consider seeking professional help if their child becomes uncharacteristically withdrawn, sad, or angry for several months. Warning signs could include:

- having his/her grades plummet in school
- losing friends – or suddenly hanging out with a new group of troubled kids
- displaying radical changes in behavior, including uncharacteristic, intense anger; lying, cheating, or stealing; playing hooky regularly, or fighting at school
- developing physical symptoms, such as sleep or eating disorders, unexplained stomach or headaches.

For more information about red flags in a child's behavior after separation or divorce, go to:  
[www.divorcemag.com/articles/warning-signs-are-your-kids-at-risk](http://www.divorcemag.com/articles/warning-signs-are-your-kids-at-risk)

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