

# Helping Children Deal with Divorce

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## Should I use this publication?

Yes, if:

- You are a parent thinking about ending your marriage or domestic partnership
- You and your partner are thinking about making your relationship permanent and/or having children
- you are interested in improving your parenting skills

Other publications at our website, [www.washingtonlawhelp.org](http://www.washingtonlawhelp.org), have more information regarding the divorce process, and forms and instructions. If you have questions about your situation, talk to a lawyer.

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- ❖ State law about marriage and divorce also applies to marriages between same-sex couples. The Legal Voice's publication called [Marriage for Same-Sex Couples in Washington](#) has more information. See [www.legalvoice.org](http://www.legalvoice.org).
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## What can I do before I even have children?

Before you get married, you both should have talked about parenting issues, including:

- Whether and when to have children
- Values about raising children
- Ideas about parenting
- How to divide responsibility for parenting

If you disagree on those issues, decide before you get married and have children how you will work out parenting and other disagreements in the future.

- Can you sit down and talk together?
- Does family counseling help?
- Can a clergy member help with those issues?

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- ❖ **If there is domestic violence** in your relationship, do not use these methods of resolving conflict. Call the Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-562-6025 for more information about how to protect yourself and your children.
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Before having children, make sure your relationship with your spouse/partner is healthy and stable and you have good skills in place for resolving conflict.

Having children means:

- more decisions to make
- more chances for disagreements

## **My spouse/partner and I fight all the time. It seems like divorce would be only a good thing for my children as well as us parents.**

How divorce affects children is complicated. Divorce puts adults and children under a lot of stress.

Some experts believe the stress and changes divorce causes make parenting skills worse. Some studies report children of divorce may be more likely to:

- Have poorer physical health
- Do poorly in school
- Abuse alcohol and drugs

Not all children suffer such negative effects. About 75% of children of divorce are okay. They may need time to get to this point after finding out you are breaking up.

If you separate and/or end your relationship, you must make more decisions at a time when you may have bad feelings about the other parent. Be ready with good conflict-resolution skills. Know how to find help if you cannot settle things on your own. This will make things easier for your children.

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- ❖ Read [For Better or Worse](#) by Mavis Hetherington. The author is a psychologist who conducted a 25-year study of children whose parents divorce. You can get this book and many other books on marriage, divorce, and parenting at the public library.
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## **What can I do to help protect my children from any negative effects of my divorce?**

Work with your spouse/partner. Make sure you both have strong, positive relationships with your children and you both are involved in parenting while you are together. You must help maintain the children's relationship with the other parent.

Washington law supports children having strong, continued relationships with both parents. The law also recognizes there may be cases where a court should limit a parent's time with a child because of:

- domestic violence
- substance abuse
- a parent's abusive use of conflict
- other parenting problems

## **How can we keep our children out of the middle of our divorce?**

Make sure you have a support system. Encourage your spouse to have one, too.

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- ❖ Neither of you should use your children as a source of support.
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Your children's well-being depends on the well-being of both parents. Anything you do that harms the other parent also harms your children.

## **Should we talk about the divorce with or around the children?**

Decide how you and your spouse/partner will communicate and settle disagreements about the children after

the divorce/separation. **Do not use the children as go-betweens or messengers.** Do not involve them in adult conflicts about parenting, child support, or other issues related to your divorce.

### **How can the divorce process help?**

If you separate or file for divorce, make sure there is a good child support order in place so the children have enough support in the home/s where they are living. If you are the parent paying support, pay your child support regularly and on time.

### **What if I need legal help?**

- **Apply online with CLEAR\*Online** <https://nwjustice.org/get-legal-help>  
or
- **Call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014**

CLEAR is Washington’s toll-free, centralized intake, advice and referral service for low-income people seeking free legal assistance with civil legal problems.

**Outside King County:** Call 1-888-201-1014 weekdays from 9:15 a.m. until 12:15 p.m.

**King County:** Call 211 for information and referral to an appropriate legal services provider Monday through Friday from 8:00 am – 6:00 pm. You may also call (206) 461-3200, or the toll-free number, 1-877-211-WASH (9274). You can also get information on legal service providers in King County through 211’s website at [www.resourcehouse.com/win211/](http://www.resourcehouse.com/win211/).

**Persons 60 and Over:** Persons 60 or over may call CLEAR\*Sr at 1-888-387-7111, regardless of income.

Deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired callers can call CLEAR or 211 using the relay service of their choice.

211 and CLEAR will conference in interpreters when needed at no cost to callers.

Free legal education publications, videos and self-help packets covering many legal issues are available at [www.washingtonlawhelp.org](http://www.washingtonlawhelp.org).

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This publication provides general information concerning your rights and responsibilities. It is not intended as a substitute for specific legal advice.

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