

# Supporting the Changing Family

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## How Family and Friends Can Help

Few families today are exempt from divorce. The child's experience can be overwhelming at times. The good news is that by supporting key development assets we can enable children to lead healthy, productive lives. Divorcing parents' extended family can be part of the solution in family restructuring.

The Search Institute (Minneapolis, 1999) has organized "development assets," which are essential building blocks for the foundation of growing children. Understanding and focusing on these development assets can help bring a positive approach to the divorce experience for children. The 40 assets are organized into eight general categories.

A variety of practical ways used to support and strengthen children living in divorce transitions can benefit all children.

### 1. Support them with love, care, and attention.

Caring, supportive relationships are vital to children and teenagers especially during the divorce process.

- *Freely give them love, affirmation, and acceptance.* Reassure the children in transition that regardless of status they are loved, valued, admired, and not seen as failures.
- *Surround them with people who care and listen.* Extended family members can reassure children. Being a good listener helps children realize someone cares.
- *Help them know that they belong.* Including biological and stepchildren in family celebrations and family traditions with equal attention and affection helps them belong to a secure group of people.
- *Be flexible.* Being flexible with family celebrations to accommodate visitation challenges creates a sense of belonging.
- *Across the miles.* When grandparents are not geographically close, they and the children may send notes, cards, and messages. E-mail and telephone conversations maintain ties.
- *Hold the gifts.* Don't go overboard with gifts. The personal contact between the grandparent and grandchildren is the key.
- *Child-care opportunities.* Child care by grandparents may support both the parent and the child/children as well as provide an opportunity to focus on a loving, caring adult-child relationship.

### 2. Empower children with opportunities to make a difference in their family and community.

Kids need to discover the joy of making a difference. You empower children when you:

- *Help them feel valued and valuable.* Display their pictures, hang artwork or schoolwork on your refrigerator, and spend one-on-one time with each child.
- *Give them opportunities to serve others.* Help children of divorce become or stay involved in community organizations. Parents may have difficulty transporting children to such groups as 4-H, Scouts, or religious organizations, which promote service to others and provide growth opportunities for the child.
- *Keep them safe.* Be aware of child safety at all times—child-proof your home, use a child safety seat in your car, assist with after-school child care, etc.

### 3. Establish clear boundaries and have high expectations.

Young people need your guidance to stay safe and healthy. You offer healthy boundaries and expectations when you:

- *Set and enforce clear, respectful rules and limits.* Clearly define the "house rules." Acknowledge that families may have different rules, but be consistent with your limits and expectations. Consistent coordination of rules by families and adults will benefit the child.
- *Behave in healthy and responsible ways.* "Actions speak louder than words." Many grandparents and caring adults find themselves as the primary mentor in the child's life during divorce. You can be an influential example to children in transition. Modeling positive behaviors shows children responsible actions and lifestyles.
- *Expect and help kids to do and be their best.* Research indicates children tend to conduct themselves as the adults expect. If you expect children of divorce to "do their best," they are more likely to give their best. If you emphasize school achievement, children are more likely to succeed in school.

### 4. Help them find activities that make constructive use of their time.

Children need access to quality programs and activities that enrich their lives, develop their talents and interests, and help them develop healthy relationships.

- *Expressive Art.* Activities help children express feelings—*art, music, writing, and puppetry are forms of helpful expression.* Drawing, role playing, and brainstorming allow children to express feelings more freely. Have art supplies on hand. Don't worry about the "mess." Even kitchen projects allow children to be expressive and create an opportunity to communicate.
- *Music.* Research shows that music develops a child's mind and can improve academic achievement. Encourage a child's interest in chorus programs and school bands.
- *Listening.* Talking and listening help supporting adults understand the children's emotions. Reading age-appropriate books about divorce can help children work through the issues they face.
- *Physical Activity.* Sports for some children are an excellent constructive pastime. A supporting adult can help the transitioning child participate in Little League or school sports programs.
- *Youth Groups.* Involvement in organized programs such as 4-H clubs, Scouts, and FFA provides unique opportunities to build leadership skills, critical life skills, and social competencies. Religious programs strengthen the foundation for many youths. Both religious and secular groups support systems for the children of divorce.
- *Program Access.* Providing transportation or financial assistance can help children access art programs, sports, and youth groups.

## 5. Nurture in them a commitment to learning.

Children need to develop a lifelong commitment to learning. You can support them by:

- *Encouraging them in their education.* Acknowledge school achievements. Attend school extracurricular activities. Talk about school activities and friends and **listen**.
- *Challenging them to explore and learn new things.* Provide family field trips, expose children to new and different experiences. Participate in lifelong learning activities yourself and share them with the children. (Model the desired behavior.)
- *Reading and learning with them.* Read aloud to children, listen to them read, and provide reading material at your home. Make sure they have access to books and reading material at their home; give them magazine subscriptions, books, etc.

## 6. Instill positive values to guide them.

Positive values give children and youths the "internal compass" they need to guide themselves.

- *Model positive values.* Children will model the behaviors they observe. Modeling positive values is a powerful influence.
- *Give children opportunities to think and talk about their values.* Conversations about family, friends, money, and life all help children sort out their values.
- *Support and guide them as they put their values into practice.* Set clear guidelines and be consistent. Support children's transition into adulthood.

## 7. Help children develop life skills and social competencies.

Social competencies are the life skills youths need to become independent, capable, and competent. To foster social competencies:

- *Expose them to new people and things.* Help grandchildren interact with a variety of cultures. Take them on trips to understand new and different environments.
- *Model and teach the skills they need.* It is important to model being tolerant, flexible, and open-minded. The lifestyle you live is an example they will strongly consider.
- *Challenge them to use their skills.* Foster independence at every opportunity. Allow preschoolers to develop self-help skills, encourage school-age children to resolve their own conflicts (nonviolently), and permit teenagers to resolve conflicts peacefully.

## 8. Nurture, celebrate, and affirm children's positive identity.

A positive identity forms the foundation that helps young people feel secure in themselves. To nurture a positive identity:

- *Love and support children of divorce unconditionally.* Let them know you will be there for them and show them. Support both natural and stepchildren in the same way.
- *Live a life filled with purpose, meaning, and optimism.* You can't fix the marriage that just ended in divorce. Maintain a balance among your own life, your children's lives, and your grandchildren's lives.
- *Help them find meaning and purpose in their own lives.* Encourage their discovery process and avoid discouragement. Remember that positive attitudes are contagious.