

# Talking to kids about divorce

*how to handle hard conversations*



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*helping good parents get through a bad time*

## a note from Christina

Based on my work as a divorce coach and parent educator, I can tell you there's no magic bullet. Getting your kids through the post-divorce rough spots takes more than love.

There will be times when you'll have to dig deep, swallow your pride, look past what feels unfair, find ways to compromise or bite your tongue. While you may be very committed to your kids, keep in mind that willpower alone won't get you there. In order to be the parent your children need you to be, you'll need to have a good support system and access to information you can trust.

Ever heard the saying, "It's hard to see the picture when you're in the frame?"

Whether you vent to a trusted friend, seek guidance from a life coach or therapist, attend a parenting class, gain information from experts in an online summit or talk to a spiritual advisor from a place of worship, connecting with positive people who are outside the frame of your life helps you stay on track.

As you look over the information in this booklet, you may have an "Ah-ha" moment or feelings of regret over things you've said to your children in the past. Be gentle with yourself. No parent gets it right every time. If you didn't do the best job of talking to your kids, you can always circle back and have another conversation.

Let them know you thought about what you said and you wish you had handled the conversation in a different way. Children are often very forgiving and will appreciate you trying again. Circling back and owning your mistake, also sets a valuable example for your kids. It lets them know it's important to admit when you slip up and find a way to make things right.

Regardless of what life has thrown your way, hang in there and keep the conversation going!

x,



Many parents have found SPLIT to be extremely helpful and healing for their families.

**Here are a few recommendations to consider before showing it to your kids.**

### **Think about your family dynamics.**

Before choosing to show this film or any other program to your kids, it's important to evaluate the emotional dynamics of your children and family. Additionally, give some thought to how your children are handling the divorce and where they are in their grieving process.

A child who is in denial, struggling to accept the divorce/separation, or a child that is extremely sad, may not be emotionally ready to watch this film. You may need to give your children some time to adjust and accept how the family is changing before you share it with them.

### **Preview the film by yourself first.**

Not every resource is a fit for every family. Be sure to watch the film on your own before showing it to your children.

Here's why...

Parts of this film can be hard-hitting for parents. When children see a parent having a strong emotional reaction to something often their first instinct is to want to take care of that parent. It also possible that seeing you upset may be overwhelming, confusing, or scary for your child.



Previewing the film also provides you with upfront time to prepare. If you feel the film would be helpful to your kids, we suggest you think about issues like:

- How you can create the best environment for viewing.
- When or how you share information about the film with your co-parent.
- When you might show the film to your children and how you can provide them with some emotional space to process it.
- And how to use it as a springboard for getting helpful and healing conversations started with your kids.



# 1

## How to use SPLIT - Suggestions & Tips

If you want some guidance on how to process the film with your children, we suggest you check out the film discussion guide, which offers helpful tips, information on how to help your children, and scripted prompts for talking to kids.

### Share the purpose of this film.

Let your children know this film was made for kids by kids. The goal of SPLIT is to give voice to how divorce really feels for children when parents part and to let them know they're not alone.

### If kids don't talk.

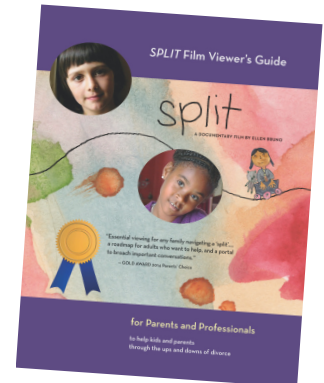
Don't worry if your kids don't open up right away. Watching the film and asking a few general questions is a good start. This lets your children know you are open to talking.

If they don't want to talk right away, give them some space. Let them know when they are ready to talk, you'll be ready to listen.

### ★ The SPLIT Film Guide for Parents and Professionals

★ 130 - full color pages  
★ 8.5" x 11"

★ Available at  
★ [www.splitfilm.org](http://www.splitfilm.org)



This beautifully illustrated guide has been designed to help kids and parents find helpful and healing ways to talk about divorce.

Filled with question prompts for parents and professionals this guide also provides practical tips and tools to help you help your kids.

Interested in watching  
SPLIT again?

[Stream it here!](http://www.splitfilm.org)

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split

To find out more visit [www.splitfilm.org](http://www.splitfilm.org)





# talking to kids: the basics

## Shore yourself up first.

Talking about the hard stuff isn't just tough for kids. It's also tough for us as parents. Before initiating a conversation with your children, be sure to sort through your own feelings about the situation, problem or issue. Think about what you will need to say and how you will responsibly manage your feelings during the conversation.

## Plan what you say to your children.

Instead of having a conversation on the fly, plan what you want to say to your children about the issue or problem. Consider what they need to know and what are they better off not hearing.

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## Not sure where to draw the line?

### Ask yourself these questions:

- What feelings do I have about this issue, the divorce or the other parent?
- Do I want to share this information because I need to tell it or because my child needs to hear it?
- How will sharing this information help my child? How might it hurt them?
- Will this information improve my child's relationship with the other parent or damage it?

## Resist the urge to gloss over or side-step the hard stuff.

In an effort to soften the blow, sometimes parents try to side-step difficult subjects or conversations by glossing things over or saying very little.

When you avoid being clear with children it may:

- Leave them wondering if there's something you're not telling them.
- Cause confusion about what's really happening.
- Send a subtle message that it's not okay to talk about it.
- Prompt them to create their own story about what's happening (which may not be accurate)

Keep in mind, being direct does not mean overindulging children with adult details and information. You still need to talk with your children in an age-appropriate manner and protect them from issues between parents.

## Manage the "truth" responsibly.

While you may feel a strong need to tell your children the truth about the other parent or situation, realize there are lots of different ways to speak the truth. Avoid making your issues with your Ex your children's issues.

Talking to your kids directly about personal details, infidelity, addiction or domestic violence needs to be handled with care. Stay focused on the problem, not the person.

# talking to kids: the basics

## More isn't always better.

No matter how well you explain things or how carefully you word your answer when it comes to explaining "why" you will probably never be able to completely satisfy your child's need to know. Kids are naturally curious. It's not uncommon for them to keep asking "why?" want more information, or press parents for the "real" reason.

Sometimes kids want more information because they think if they can understand the problem, they can fix it. There may also be other issues brewing under the surface, like "Will you ever stop loving me?" or "Who is telling me the truth?" Above all, avoid giving kids additional details until you're clear about why your kids want to know more. A lot of times there's more to our children's questions than we realize.

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## Don't feel like you have to have all the answers.

If a question or issue comes up and you're not sure what to say, don't feel pressured to answer on the spot. It's fine to tell you, kids, you don't know or that you need some time to think about their questions. Be sure not to leave them hanging. If you delay giving them an answer, it's important to circle back and continue the conversation.

## Keep the conversation going.

Often the feelings and worries children have about a tough issue or situation don't go away after one conversation. Just because you've had an initial talk doesn't mean they're not still thinking about it or that they believe what you told them. Children will most likely need to be reassured over a period of time. Also as life moves forward different issues may come up for them. Be sure to let your children know if they have any other questions that can always come back and talk to you.

**If your kids keep asking for details you feel they shouldn't have, you can say something like...**

"I know understanding why this happened is hard and you have questions.

When I can answer your questions, I will.

However, you need to know that there are some things about the divorce that are private and meant to be just between parents."

**or this...**

"When relationships end there's usually a lot of hurt, upset, and disappointment between parents.

Those parts of our divorce belong to us and don't have anything to do with you.

You might think that knowing more will make it easier to understand, but it won't.

What's most important is that you have a great relationship with both of your parents. You should never have to pick sides or feel caught in the middle."



# talking to kids about hard stuff

## It's natural to want to shield your kids from the hurt

When I coach parents about how to help their children cope with divorce, one of the first questions they often ask is “What do I say?” or “How can I talk about this?” And it’s not just that first big talk that parents are losing sleepover.

There are an endless number of situations that leave parents grappling for the right words.

Marlene had an affair and wants to know what she should say to her teenage kids to keep them from being angry with her.

Joel has a serious girlfriend and wants to tell his 10-year-old son he’s seeing someone. How can he break the news without making him upset?

Six-year-old Javier is devastated because Mom didn’t show up for her weekend again. Dad wants to know what he should say to keep him from being sad.

Celeste’s Ex is an alcoholic and abuses drugs, how does she explain to her children that they can’t spend time with their father?

Understandably, lots of parents want to shield their children from the hurt. However, what most of us overlook is that those feelings we desperately want to dodge or protect our kids from are necessary.

**While having the “right” words can be important when tough times hit parenting your kids successfully through a divorce isn’t just knowing what to say and when to say it. Sometimes it’s about knowing when to listen, being open to what your kids have to say, and supporting how they feel by letting them know those feelings are understandable.**



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**Divorce doesn't make  
you a bad parent.**

**It makes you a parent  
going through a bad  
time.**

**Worried that your kids will be devastated by divorce?**

**Have a difficult Ex who won't cooperate?**

**When your kids are upset or struggling do you know what to say?**

**Ever wish you had someone you could talk to that could  
help you find the answers you're looking for?**

It's normal to feel overwhelmed and unprepared for all the changes divorce throws your way. That doesn't mean that your life and the lives of your kids have to be overshadowed by divorce.

Whether you are parenting on your own, recently separated, in the throes of getting a divorce, or years down the road, find out how coaching can help you get the insight, strategies, and tools to get through this bad time.



**Ready for things to be different?**

**Find out how coaching can help**

**divorceandchildren.com**



# how to be a validating parent

## ..... Key Points for becoming a better listener .....

### **Be an available parent.**

While listening seems pretty straightforward, doing it well takes a lot of practice. In today's uber-busy ever distracted world, it's super easy to hear, but not listen.

AND we are all guilty of it. You may be physically there but mentally checked out. This is when listening gets lost somewhere between emptying the dishwasher and responding to a crisis text from work.

When your children want to talk, put away your phone, look them in the eye and give them your full attention.

### **Check in with your kids on a regular basis.**

Instead of waiting for a crisis to happen, make a habit of regularly checking in with your kids to find out what's going on in their world. To make sure that time doesn't get eaten up by everyday life block out 15 to 20 minutes a day or a couple of times a week to touch base with your kids.

You might even consider hooking it to something you do every day. Maybe your check-in time is during the ride home from school. Perhaps when you're putting them to bed, you can linger and listen. Other kids tend to talk more when you engage them in an activity like, taking a walk, sitting on the floor to color, or kicking a ball around.

The key is to choose a time when both you and your kids can be distraction-free (i.e., no screens, no phones, no video games)

Remember every conversation doesn't have to involve them purging their soul. The goal is to let your kids know what they are thinking and feeling matters to you and that you are there for them.

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# how to be a validating parent

## ..... Key Points for becoming a better listener .....

### **Avoid judging or reacting to what they say.**

The art of listening is more than just hearing what is being said. It also involves trying to understand your child's perspective. When talking with your kids do your best to let go of your own judgments, thoughts, and opinions.

Of course, there are lots of landmines you may encounter along the way. Like those times when your kid says something that's really hard for you to hear like "Your rules suck, I don't want to live with you anymore!" or "This is all your fault, why are you ruining our family."

While every bone in your body is screaming, "Oh no, you did not just go there," it's often more helpful to bite your tongue, stay calm, lean in, and listen while keeping your feelings in check.

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### **Get curious and ask open-ended questions.**

One way to improve your listening skills is by being curious and asking simple questions such as:

- How do you feel about what Mom/Dad said?
- Help me understand what's going on?
- What do you think would help? How can I help?
- How long have you felt this way?
- On a scale of one to ten, how (mad, sad upset, etc.) are you?





# how to be a validating parent

## Key Points for becoming a better listener

### Resist the urge to fix it or offer advice.

When kids are hurting or say something that hits you hard, it can be a real challenge not to shift into fix-it mode, offer words of wisdom or try to put a positive spin on the situation. Remember, what children need is for you to understand the situation, not solve it.

### Let them know you “get it.”

Along with hearing what’s been said, kids need to know that you understand how they’re feeling.

Letting kids know you “get it” is an essential component of validation. To be honest, this is where a lot of us get tripped up. Validating your children doesn’t mean you have to agree with what’s being said or how they feel. It simply means you make an effort to see the situation through your children’s eyes.

For example, imagine six-year-old Maci has a major meltdown because she left her favorite stuffed animal at Dad’s house.

Instead of launching into all the ways she can avoid forgetting it next time, you take a different approach. After hearing her out, it might be more helpful to say something like, “I can tell your stuffed animal is very important to you. It must really hard not having things where you want them.”

### Give them options.

Although you may be doing your best to support your children’s feelings and be a good listener, that doesn’t mean you’re always the ideal person for them to talk to about difficult issues. Kids often have a lot of unspoken worries about how their feelings and choices will affect their parents.

Sometimes kids worry that sharing how they feel might:

- Hurt a parent’s feelings
- Make things worse
- Start an argument between Mom and Dad
- Make a parent angry
- Cause a parent to stop seeing them
- Leave a parent feeling betrayed

Help your children identify safe adults they can turn to for advice and support. Good people for kids to talk to might be a grandparent, a favorite aunt or uncle, a family friend, teacher, coach or clergy.

Make sure your kids have the support they need by:

- Reassuring them, it’s okay to talk and ask questions.
- Being open to hearing what they have to say (even when you don’t agree or have a different perspective.)
- Letting them know it’s okay to talk to others.



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split

from filmmaker Ellen Bruno and  
12 amazing kids

[www.splitfilm.com](http://www.splitfilm.com)

## A film about divorce for kids and their parents

"A beautiful film that should be required viewing for all parents going through divorce.  
It will touch your heart, highly recommended!"

While divorce changes almost every part of a child's life, sadly it's rarely talked about in a helpful or healing way.

### Until now...

Created to let kids know they're not alone, SPLIT normalizes the many feelings children experience while providing the reassuring message that it's okay to talk about divorce.

Featuring twelve amazing children (6-12 years old) this film also gives parents an unfiltered glimpse of what it really feels like for kids when parents part and pulls back the curtain on all the unspoken worries children often face.

Filled with straight from the heart wisdom this deeply touching documentary offers hope, healing, and even a few laugh-out-loud moments.

Each year millions of children are left to manage their parent's divorce, on their own or with little support.

coming soon in 2021

**SPLIT the sequel**



find out more at: [www.splitfilm.com](http://www.splitfilm.com)

## pitfalls to avoid

### When our kids are struggling, it sets off a powerful need in us as parents to make it okay.

Sometimes our need for things to be okay comes from a desire to protect and shield our children. **But sometimes, making it okay is really more about us than it is our kids.**

This is especially true when it comes to divorce. Splitting up tends to create a lot of guilt for us as parents.

Maybe you're feeling guilty over not being able to keep the family together or how your children's lives have changed. For others, it might be connected to your kids going back and forth between two homes. It could be you have a coparenting relationship that is riddled with conflict, and you hate that your children get caught in the middle.

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### Sometimes, in an effort to diminish that guilt you might fall into the trap of:

**Dismissing the upset:** "Hey let's not sit around and be sad about Dad not showing up. Why don't we head over to the arcade and play some laser tag? That ought to cheer you up."

**Instead of:** "You were really looking forward to seeing Dad. I know you miss him."

**Fixing the problem:** "If talking to Mom before bedtime is making you homesick, maybe she needs to stop calling."

**Instead of:** "You seem homesick after talking to Mom. It's tough not having her here to tuck you in."

**Putting a positive spin on things:** "I know it's hard having two homes but how cool is it to have two birthdays, two Christmases and extra vacations?" or "This really is for the best. In the end, we'll all be much happier."

**Instead of:** "I know things aren't the way you want them to be. I'm sorry this is so hard for you."

**Avoiding the issue and not talking about it at all.**

**Instead of:** "Acknowledging your child's truth and validating their feelings."



# validation cheat sheet

..... To help you get started .....

Validating our children in theory sounds pretty simple. However, for lots of us it doesn't come naturally, especially when you're in the middle of a tough conversation, having a disagreement or dealing with an angry/sad child.

To help you get started, below are a few stem-sentences. Read over the suggestions listed and think about how you can use or adapt them with your kids.

## 4 Easy Go-To Validation Statements to Use With Kids

"Of course." "Me too." "I get it." "That's understandable."

- Wow, you're really (upset, sad, angry etc.)
- I would be (upset, sad, frightened, scared) too!!
- Hang on, I don't understand. What's going on?
- What am I not getting? Can you help me understand?
- Fair enough... or You may be right!
- How can I help you?
- It's going to be hard...but I know you'll figure it out.
- I'm not sure what to say but I'm so glad you told me.
- What exactly happened? (Ask fact-checking questions)
- Here's what I think I heard you say, did I get that right?
- I think most people would feel that way when...
- I need time to think about this. I'll get back to you.
- I can see this is really important to you.
- Would you like to talk about ways to tackle this issue?
- If you'd like to brainstorm ideas, let me know, I'm here for you.
- This isn't easy for me to hear but I'm really glad you trusted me enough to tell me.

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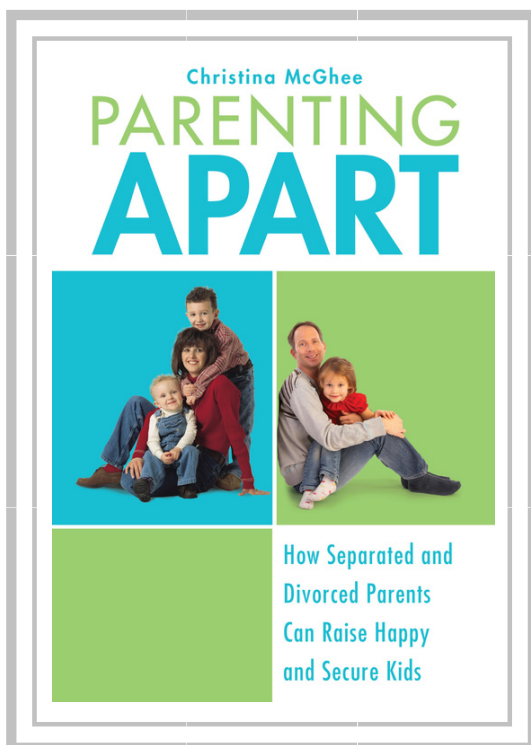
# PARENTING APART

helping separated and divorced  
parents raise **happy** and **secure** kids

Christina McGhee, MSW  
[www.divorceandchildren.com](http://www.divorceandchildren.com)

**"The book every child wishes their divorced parent would read."**

Amy McCready, founder of Positive Parenting Solutions  
[www.positiveparentingsolutions.com](http://www.positiveparentingsolutions.com)



**Right now, there's probably nothing you want more than for your kids to be okay.**

In PARENTING APART, Christina McGhee offers quick and convenient access to the information you need to tackle tough co-parenting problems.

Formatted in short, easy-to-read chapters, this book not only offers practical, effective ways to minimize the effects of divorce on your kids but will also help you strengthen your relationship with them.

**get your copy**

## Help your children learn they can handle hard things and still be okay.

Here's the deal... there are lots of things about divorce that suck for your kids. When things are tough, it's normal (and healthy) to feel sad, upset, frustrated or angry. In those moments, our children don't need us to fix it, make it better or spin it. What they really need is for us to stand right there next to them in "the suck circle" and be a witness to their truth.

When we do, we have an opportunity to reassure our kids that:

- Their feelings matter.
- It's okay to talk about how they feel.
- We're strong enough to handle their upset, sadness, or anger.
- They don't have to be emotionally responsible for us.
- Our story doesn't have to be their story.

(While divorce may have made things better for us, we understand it may feel different for them.)

The other thing that's important to realize is this... Divorce won't be the only challenge in life that your children will face. As they grow up and move out into the world, they'll encounter other situations that may really suck.

When you are willing to have the hard conversations and acknowledge their feelings about a situation you not only validate their emotions, but it also helps them build a sense of self competency. A belief that they can handle hard things and still be okay. And that's a skill that will last them a lifetime.





# when to look for help

A lot of parents wonder if they should put their kids in counseling. While there are benefits to therapy, divorce is a change in a family, not a disorder.

Unless circumstances are severe (i.e. high conflict, domestic abuse, addiction, alienation, thoughts of self-harm, significant changes in behavior, etc.) consider making an appointment for yourself before introducing your children to a counselor or therapist.

Often with professional guidance, parents can learn the skills they need to make important changes for their kids. In the case where therapy is needed, meeting with a professional first, gives you a chance to evaluate whether or not they're a good fit for your family.

One-on-one isn't the only option. Kids can really benefit from groups that focus on teaching coping skills and problem-solving when parents split. Consider checking with your children's school to find out what might be available in your area.

If you decide to look for a counselor, seek out someone with qualifications that match your needs. For example, if your kids are getting caught in the middle and tensions are high, look for someone who has experience in dealing with high-conflict divorces.

For situations that involve addiction or abuse, look for a therapist who is qualified to help families cope with those issues.



Talking about divorce can feel really awkward for children (and for parents too). Sometimes kids can talk more freely when the focus isn't entirely on them. Consider reading an age-appropriate book or watching a film/video about divorce to engage your children in a meaningful conversation.

Taking an indirect approach usually feels less intimidating than a direct conversation. Instead of talking about how the family is changing, your kids may feel more comfortable commenting about what happening in a story or film.

Book and other media can also help you and your children establish a common language or references for talking with each other.

# When a parent has an addiction or mental health issue

While it's expected that family change will be hard for your children, when a parent is engaging in destructive behaviors like alcohol or drug abuse or is challenged by a mental health issue, it naturally creates additional challenges.

Not only do your kids have to come to terms with the divorce, but they also must deal with a multitude of losses related to their parent's ongoing addiction or mental health issues.

Because these issues often involve relapse, a series of broken promises and disappointments, or strain on the parent/child relationship, children are often left living in a state of emotional upheaval.

## When one parent is struggling, co-parenting requires a delicate balance between:

- Supporting your children's relationship with their other parent while keeping them safe.
- Providing a predictable environment while dealing with an unpredictable situation.
- Acknowledging the problem without attacking the person.
- Separating your feelings about the other parent's addiction from your children's needs.

If you are a parent who is worried about the long-term impact your ex's addiction or mental health issues are having on your children, there is hope.

While you may not be able to control how your Ex manages their circumstance or well-being, you can help your children understand the situation and gain a sense of security by being a stable, nurturing force in their lives.

You may also want to consider utilizing some of the suggestions and tips for supporting your children on the following page.

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When your kids look back  
on this time in their lives...

What will you have done  
to make them proud?

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# tips for helping children cope with an addiction or mental health issues

## Acknowledge your children's feelings about the problem and reassure them it's okay to talk about it.

Although it's hard to see your children hurting, remember that supporting children's feelings and being a good listener can go a long way with kids. When you seek to understand instead of solving your child's problem, you are reinforcing some very important concepts.

First, you're sending a strong message that you view them as capable and competent at handling tough situations. Second, when they are facing a challenging or difficult time, talking about the problem lets them know it's okay to seek support from others. Lastly, you are underscoring that you respect their feelings and there's no reason to feel embarrassed or ashamed about a parent's addiction or mental health issues.

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## Provide children with age-appropriate information about addiction and mental health

While there's still a big gap in support for families dealing with these issues, there are a couple of resources worth checking out. Keep in mind, not every resource will be a fit for your family or child. Be sure to preview any books or information before sharing it with your children.

## Teach your children how to stay safe.

The truth is in this day and age we cannot be with our children 24/7 to protect them. Do your best to teach children how to recognize unsafe situations, when and how to call for help, and to feel confident about seeking out a safe adult when necessary.

## Make sure your children understand they are not responsible for their parent's addiction.

Much like when parents divorce, children often feel a strong sense of responsibility and guilt about their parent's addiction. Reassure your children that they are not to blame for what has happened. Also, make sure they understand they cannot change or fix their parent's problems.

Remember healing from divorce takes time. When other issues like alcohol, drug abuse, and mental health are thrown into the mix, that process often takes much longer. More than anything, find a way to keep moving forward so children don't get stuck in anger and sadness.

Also, during this time be sure that you are paying close attention to your own needs. Develop sources of support for you and your kids outside of your immediate family.

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## books for children: addiction and mental health

### **Emmy's Question by Jeannine Auth**

Powerful story about a school-age girl's struggle to deal with her mother's alcoholism. (For 9-12 years old)

### **My Dad Loves Me, My Dad Has a Disease: A Child's View: Living with Addiction**

by Claudia Black

Provides children with an opportunity to express their feelings and fears while gaining a better understanding of addiction. (Ages 5-12)

### **An Elephant In the Living Room**

by Jill M. Hastings and Marion H. Typpo  
Presented as a workbook, An Elephant in the Living Room offers children both information and tools for dealing with parental addiction. (For 9-12 years old)

For Parents:

### **Understanding Addiction and Recovery Through a Child's Eyes: Hope, Help, and Healing for Families by Jerry Moe M.A.**

Helpful to both professionals and family members, it offers hope and provides insight into the resilience of children whose lives have been overshadowed by a parent's addiction.

### **When Parents Have Problems: A Book for Teens and Older Children With an Abusive, Alcoholic, or Mentally Ill Parent**

by Susan B. Miller

This book is written for teens, however, it may be a good resource for a parent to read first. After reviewing the material you may want to pick out what's most appropriate and adapt some of the concepts it offers for your children.

### **Organizations that offer help:**

**Al-Anon/Alateen | [www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org)**

888-4AL-ANON

For people who have been affected by someone else's drinking problem.

**National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACOA) | [www.nacoa.org](http://www.nacoa.org)**

888-554-2627

NACOA's mission is to eliminate the adverse impact of alcohol and drug use on children and families. We envision a world in which no child who struggles because of family addiction will be left unsupported.

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