

# DIVORCE AFTER ADOPTION\*

By Jean MacLeod



Divorce isn't the ending that parents envision when they begin the journey to adopt. In addition to the normal stress of a dissolved relationship, a parent may feel extra guilt over inflicting an additional trauma on a child with a history of adoption losses. How you handle yourself during the process of divorce can mitigate some of the guilt: Recognize that when a parent chooses to demonstrate a "good" ending to a bad situation, it can set an incredibly important example.

Whether a couple's divorce is amicable or acrimonious, children need to be guided through their own pain, fear, and confusion.

*Through the process of adoption, our children lost birthparents and an extended family of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and even siblings. Internationally adopted children lost their birth country, birth culture, and language. Some of our daughters and sons lost orphanage caretakers who they cared about; others lost foster families they had loved and lived with since birth.*

For an adoptee, any transition or change may feel like a precursor to another traumatic loss. Always a stressful event, divorce may impact an

unsupported adoptee on the nuclear-explosion level. How can parents make a transition less traumatic?

***We can realize that the extra layers of adoption require extra-care parenting before, during, and after a divorce.***

Deborah N. Silverstein, LCSW, and Sharon Kaplan Roszia, MS, identified the **Seven Core Issues in Adoption** as Loss, Rejection, Guilt/Shame, Grief, Identity, Intimacy, and Mastery/Control. These same issues may be activated in all children during a divorce, but they are especially impactful for adoptees who have sustained other early-life losses and those who have experienced life-changing events that were out of their own control.

Divorce is an opportunity for a parent to identify and validate core feelings, offer empathy, and help build a child's resilience with coping skills. An adopted child's awareness of his feeling that divorce equals abandonment, and **WHY** he feels the way he does, is a huge step toward him being able to successfully deal with the stress of this major life change. Parental awareness of an adoptee's multilayered emotional needs may help the child weather the divorce and help the entire family through the divorce's aftershock.

## Normalize therapy for your kids

One of the best things a parent can do for the family is to openly reach out for professional assistance. Let kids know that therapists are "Feelings Doctors," and everyone could use a tune-up! If Mom or Dad is seeing a marriage counselor or individual therapist, children should be informed in a serious but matter-of-fact manner. Parents can talk about why smart people seek guidance; normalizing therapy as a healthy choice will go a long way in helping a child see a counselor, if it is indicated.

Mom and Dad provide the marriage role models that children internalize and replicate. When a parent is able to display emotional leadership—by implementing a family emotional-behavioral plan to weather the upheaval of divorce—it teaches an adoptee that healthy relationships are worth working for and that there **is** life after loss.

An adoptive parent may need to work harder in order to address a scared or angry child's hidden fears. Modeling behavior and teaching children to handle painful adversity and overwhelming feelings takes patience and conscious effort. Parents can refer to an internal checklist to help keep the high-priority emotional focus on their children, remembering that adoption's extra layers require an extra amount of love and family leadership.

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## An internal checklist for divorcing parents:

- ❑ What is your behavior telling your children?
- ❑ Are you expressing YOUR feelings in a healthy way?
- ❑ Are you *age-appropriately* honest with your kids about your divorce? Do you answer (or bring up) questions in a straightforward manner, without getting overly upset?
- ❑ Do your children truly understand that THEY had nothing to do with YOUR divorce?
- ❑ Are you allowing your children to mourn the loss of "how life was" with two parents (even if the ex-spouse was less than perfect)?
- ❑ Do you give spoken and unspoken permission to your children to love their other parent, and do you reinforce that relationship?
- ❑ Are you allowing guilt about the divorce to immobilize your good parenting (are you able to confidently set boundaries and enforce house rules)?
- ❑ Can you put your adopted children's emotional needs as your HIGHEST PRIORITY over everything else, *for at least one year after your divorce?*
- ❑ Do you validate all of your children's emotions?
- ❑ Are you showing your children how, in spite of divorce-loss, to be happy?



### RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

*Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss*  
by Claudia Jewett Jarratt

*When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal with Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses* by John W. James and Russell Friedman

*Difficult Questions Kids Ask [and are too afraid to ask] About Divorce* by Meg F. Schneider and Joan Zuckerberg, PhD

*Divorce After Adoption: Practical Tips for Parents*

[www.adopting.org/adoptions/divorce-after-adoption-practical-tips-for-parents.html](http://www.adopting.org/adoptions/divorce-after-adoption-practical-tips-for-parents.html)

### BOOKS ABOUT DIVORCE FOR CHILDREN

A List of resources for kids:  
[tinyurl.com/agg3npm](http://tinyurl.com/agg3npm)

#### Plus, a few favorites:

*Help! A Girl's Guide to Divorce and Stepfamilies* (American Girl Library)  
by Nancy Holyoke

*Dinosaurs Divorce*  
by Marc Brown  
and Laurie Krasny Brown

*Let's Talk About It: Divorce*  
by Fred Rogers

*It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear*  
by Vicki Lansky