



SURVIVAL GUIDE TO

Divorce

Divorce comes with *all* the feelings—anger, fear, resentment, helplessness—but it doesn't have to be the end of the world. Whether you're dealing with your own parents' split or you want to help a friend whose folks are separating, we've got tips on how to cope.

By JOEY BARTOLOMEO • Illustrations by THOMAS PITILLI

WE'RE NOT GOING TO SUGARCOAT IT:

Whether the split comes as a total surprise or is a somewhat welcome relief from constant fighting, having your parents break up is rough. "Divorce disrupts your life and undermines your sense of safety and security," says Amy Baker, author of *Getting Through My Parents' Divorce*. A split family affects everything, from where you sleep to who you spend the holidays with, but it's a decision you (most likely) had no say in. "Some people act like I'm lucky to have divorced parents because I get more presents and have more pets," says Alex, 14, from California. "I disagree. My life would be easier if my parents were still together."

The good news: Even though you can't wave a

magic wand and reunite your parents (and, hey, maybe you wouldn't want to even if you could), taking control of the things you do have power over can make the situation feel a lot more manageable. We asked *Choices* readers with divorced parents to share some of the trickiest situations they deal with regularly, then polled experts for advice on how to deal. Read on for ways to cope. (*Psst*: Even if you don't have divorced parents, a lot of these strategies are just as great for negotiating any situation that makes you feel caught in the middle.)

ARE MY PARENTS GOING TO DIVORCE?

If your parents argue frequently, you may worry they're heading for a split. The truth is, all couples fight from time to time, and even couples who rarely argue may still decide it's better for them not to be married to each other. But if your parents' bickering bothers you, tell them—they may have no idea how much it's affecting you. And if one parent is ever verbally or physically abusive toward the other, tell a trusted adult like a teacher or your school guidance counselor.

● **YOUR RELATIONSHIPS**

THE PROBLEM

Different houses means different rules.

Why It's Hard: Juggling different expectations about family dinners, curfews, and bedtimes can be frustrating. "When I was younger, my mom would let me use technology at her house, but my dad wouldn't let me use it at his house," says Halley, 15, from Illinois. "It was really tough not being able to text my mom when I wanted to."

How to Cope: Don't be afraid to speak up, says Arindia Taylor, a family therapist. Your parents may not want to live with each other anymore, but they want you to be happy, so tell them what's working and what's not. "You shouldn't feel bad for saying, 'This works for me at the other house, can we do that here?'" Taylor says.

THE PROBLEM

You're meeting—or merging lives with—new people.

Why It's Hard: Accepting a parent's new boyfriend or girlfriend (not to mention that person's kid) is scary because of what it symbolizes: Your parent is moving on to a new relationship, and your family is changing. "It's especially difficult in the beginning," says Sarah, 17, from California. "All you can think about is when your parents were happy together, and you think things should still be that way."

How to Cope: Don't put too much pressure on yourself to like a parent's new partner (or their kids) right away. Still, look for shared affinities with the new person. (Wonder how to connect with someone else's kids? Start with this: the awkwardness of your folks dating.) And be sure to keep up some one-on-one time with your mom or dad, whether it's your Sunday morning pancake ritual, or binge-watching a show together.

PHILIPPE BENOIST/LEADERSHIP CREATIVE (PET SET BAG)



THE PROBLEM

Your parents put you in the middle of their disagreements.

Why It's Hard: Your job is to be a kid, not a mediator or a confidant. "There were times one of my parents would talk to me about a fight they'd had with the other," says Patrick, 17, from New York. "That's not right, and it's a bit damaging." What makes this situation extra difficult is that it's hard to stand up to one or both of your parents and say "Stop!"

How to Cope: "The number one thing is not to get caught in your parents' conflict," says Baker. Tell each

of them that you don't want to hear anything bad about the other person. To avoid getting sucked into their drama, make your point emphatically but calmly. Say something like, "It makes me feel hurt and angry when you trash-talk Mom (or Dad). I love them, and it's hard to hear you criticize them." If that doesn't help improve things, speak to a trusted (unbiased) adult—like a guidance counselor—and see if you can set up a meeting with one or both of your parents to discuss the situation.

THE PROBLEM

You miss your mom or dad. Or your sibling. Or your pets.

Why It's Hard: You want your parents to share your life as it's happening, not just the highlight reel. "My dad lives in another state, and talking on the phone isn't really cutting it, to be honest. It hurts me to know how much *he* hurts not seeing me and my sister," says Joshua, 17, from Pennsylvania.

How to Cope: Even if you're geographically separated from your parent, they can still be a part of your daily life—it just will

take a bit of planning ahead. Make a deal that you'll talk on the phone or FaceTime at a specific time daily—even just 5 minutes each morning before school can help you feel better. Also, find some favorite things you can do together or apart, like watching a TV show or reading the same book. The one thing you shouldn't do is feel angst about whether your mom or dad is sad from missing you. "It's a grown-up's job to take care of the grown-up's feelings," says Baker.

MY HAPPY BLENDED FAMILY

More siblings, more problems? Not necessarily. Asher DeBartolo Heldfond's parents stayed such good friends after their divorce, they decided to write a book about it. (It's called *Our Happy Divorce*.) With both his parents remarried, 16-year-old Asher's family dinners may not look typical—but he says he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Once a week, my mom tries to have my dad, stepmother, and half-siblings over for dinner," Asher says. "That might seem weird to some people, but I like getting to be with my whole family. We all get along and really have fun together."

THE BAG IS A DRAG Here's how to make traveling between houses less of a pain.

- Have a designated back-and-forth bag that's always packed with essentials (for example, a phone charger, contact lens solution, extra socks and underwear).
- Keep a list on your phone of items you'll need. Upload notes and homework assignments to the cloud so you can access them no matter where you are.
- If there's a hair product, tech gadget, or item of clothing you want, ask each parent for it for your birthday so you can have one at each house.
- Ask your teachers for extra copies of heavy textbooks (or see if they're available in e-book form).

