



Hanna Ingber's children Aarav, 5, and Isaac Yerasi, 8, at their home in South Orange, N.J. TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

How to make kids feel at home after divorce

Experts offer tips on helping your children adjust

By **Hanna Ingber**
The New York Times

The day my ex and I had to tell our children that we were getting divorced, we sat on the couch in the living room as they played on the rug below us. It was a pivotal moment, and our almost 5-year-old, Isaac, sensing that something big and disruptive was happening, had one very important question: What would happen to his Legos?

One of the most difficult aspects of divorce with children can be saying goodbye to the marital home as it once was and creating a new setup for the kids, whether for a joint custody arrangement or short visits. This is challenging in terms of logistics, but creating a new space can also carry all of the emotional weight of the divorce. The decision to tear up what was supposed to be intact gets played out in fights over furniture and favorite toys.

And this comes at a time when many are angry and overwhelmed. As Jann Blackstone, a child custody mediator and author of six books on divorce and

co-parenting, put it, “Most people are not at their best when they’re breaking up.”

For the children involved, getting this transition right is critical. “Kids operate on the assumption that their world is going to be stable and remain stable. So when divorce comes up, really the foundation of the children’s belief system gets shaken up in a way that often causes them to question their reality,” said Julie Ross, executive director of a parenting education organization, Parenting Horizons. “Kids wonder, ‘Can my parents divorce me?’”

Ross said that parents need to show children in a concrete way that their family and sense of belonging will be OK.

Here’s a guide to help parents facing this. It includes best practices from co-parenting experts and tips from parents.

Prepare for it

“It’s important for parents to have an idea what the kids’ life will look like and how they will present that to them,” Blackstone said.

Jerome Scharoff, a divorce attorney and father in Merrick, New York, said that when he and his ex were preparing to split, he reassured his children

that he would stay in the same town as their mother. He advises his clients who share parenting time to live near their ex.

Before my ex and I told our boys that we were separating, I would work into conversations with them that someone they knew had divorced parents. I wanted my boys to see divorce as relatively normal, not something to be feared or ashamed of, before they learned that they would experience it.

Talk about it

This may seem obvious, but explaining what’s happening to your children is essential. Some people are so upset about the divorce that they don’t talk to their children about it. But kids have questions, and they need information to help them process everything.

After my ex and I decided to divorce, I got my boys nearly every children’s book I could find on families with two homes. My children ate them up. They seemed to crave the information and would pull them from the shelves at bedtime for me to read again and again. Some favorites were “Two Homes” by Claire Masurel and “Emily’s Blue Period” by Cathleen Daly.

Create a special space

Next comes figuring out where your child will stay in your new place. Parenting experts told me it’s crucial that a setup belongs entirely to your child.

Ross said that if you can’t afford to give your child a bedroom, you could take a corner of the living room and add a bookshelf, twin bed and a cubby for clothes. Maybe add a screen around it. Add posters, bedspreads, pillows or whatever else to make it feel warm.

“You don’t want your child to feel like they’re company in their own home,” she said.

Extra points if you put up a photo of your child with the other parent.

Involve the kids

Include your children when you decorate the space. It can help ease the transition and give them some ownership over what’s happening. Ann Reitan in Bend, Oregon, said that her son, then 9, worried about the family’s safety after his parents split. For the first few years, her son would check that the house was locked and always lock the car doors.

“Letting him have choices gave him a sense of control in a situation that he otherwise had no control,” Reitan wrote. “He also got to choose the

paint color of a bathroom — dragon’s breath orange is not something that I would choose, but he still likes it.”

Kay Thomas, a professor at South Carolina Honors College, said she brought her daughter with her when she looked at apartments after she first decided to separate and then at a house after the divorce was finalized.

“Having her choose the place to live and bedroom furniture made her feel special and not left out of the process,” she said. Thomas has since founded an organization and a podcast to help those going through divorce.

Think beyond a bed and toothbrush

The more that you can make both places feel like home — even if the child only visits during holidays or vacations — the better. This means, if possible, having a toothbrush, pajamas, clothes, toys and books in both places. Try to reduce as much as you can what your child schleps back and forth.

But think broadly about what makes a place home. “The main thing for the child visiting is that they feel like they are part of the family, and other members of the family see them that way, too,” Blackstone said,

explaining that you should give your child chores, even if they are only visiting occasionally.

My parents divorced when I was little, and as a kid, it bothered me that when I went to my father’s house, we had only grape jelly and white bread, presumably what my step-family preferred. I am a strawberry and whole wheat kind of person, and not having that available made me feel like I was a visitor, not an integral part of the household.

None of this is easy. My children have experienced their parents move four times in the past few years. In our multiple moves, my ex and I continued to live close to one another, which has been good for Isaac and his brother, Aarav. And each time, my ex and I hopefully learned from earlier mistakes.

On my last move, my boys developed a strategy for how to handle their Legos. They would pack them in boxes, which would not go on the moving truck. I would take those boxes and deliver the Legos myself. When we unpacked, some of their Lego creations had indeed broken. At first, Isaac was disappointed and really frustrated. But then he realized he had only one option: to rebuild.

MY PET WORLD

Woman wishes for more from community cats

By **Cathy M. Rosenthal**
Tribune Content Agency

Dear Cathy: About three years ago, two black-and-white cats sneaked into my house when a door was open. After all this time, they still are terrified of me. I have three other cats that they get along with, but despite my welcoming them in, giving them all the space they want, providing them with food, fresh water, soft places to sleep, and safety, they still run whenever I appear. The larger of the two is about 30% trusting, though she will not permit any physical contact of any kind. The smaller one is just plain scared and hides under a chair in my room. I assume she comes downstairs to eat during the night.

Both are housebroken and have clipped ears to indicate that TNR (trap-neuter-return) has been performed. Neither one ever goes near a door to “escape.” After three years, I hold out no hope that they will ever be socialized, but

any comments from you would be welcome.

— *Nancy, Queens Village, New York*

Dear Nancy: What an amazing person you are to care for them in a way that lets them know they are safe and allows them to be who they are. My suggestion would be to do exactly what you are doing. Just feed them, talk to them, and let them know you are there if they want any attention. You also could put a pheromone plug-in in the room where the one cat hides under the chair to see if that helps.

But the truth is, they may never socialize to the point where you can touch them. While that can be hard, because you love them and want to pet them, you have already demonstrated extraordinary love and patience for these felines that few in the world could match. The reward for that may just be knowing that you have saved two lives, loved them, and provided them with a forever home.

You’re awesome.

Dear Cathy: If I hear one more person say or write that their pet is “a rescue” or that they “rescued” it, I’m going to need rescuing. I’ve worked in shelters in two states for almost 20 years. I’ve seen cats and dogs arrive in horrible condition, receive extensive medical care and loving attention sometimes for months. Hundreds, if not thousands of dollars are often spent on the care. Then, someone pays a small adoption fee, and they say they “rescued” the animal. No, the shelter rescued it; they adopted it. Perfectly admirable in and of itself. But no need to embellish. Let’s stop this madness. An adoption is not a rescue.

— *Edith, Las Vegas*

Dear Edith: I disagree. I have worked for many years, and that “small” adoption fee you mention is part of the income shelters and rescue groups need to pay for that pet’s care, which



Some community cats are semi-domesticated, but may never socialize to the point where you can touch them, writes Cathy M. Rosenthal. DREAMTIME

includes housing, food, medications, surgeries, staff salaries, etc. Without grants, donations and adoption fees, there would be no organizations or people doing rescue work.

Regarding your concern about adopters using the word “rescue,” the word has taken on a new meaning as awareness for homeless pets has grown. When I started in this field 30 years ago, people visited animal shelters as a second or third choice when looking for a new family member. But today, more people choose

animal shelters and rescue groups as their first choice because they are much more aware of the plight of homeless pets and want to be part of the solution.

As a result, there has been a language shift; the word “adoption” has become synonymous with the word “rescue.” People generally don’t say they adopted a pet anymore; they say they rescued one. By using this language, they are communicating in a single word that their newest family member is from an animal

shelter and not a breeder.

That’s a powerful message and one that pet parents are naturally proud of. They are not only a part of their pet’s rescue story, but THE essential happy ending needed for the final rescue of that pet. So, it’s not a diss to the animal shelter or rescue group to say, “I rescued my dog.” It’s an acknowledgment of the role the pet parent played in this lifesaving work. When you think about it on this level, I hope you can appreciate all the people stepping up to “rescue” pets and give them forever homes.

After all, the only thing that matters is that dogs and cats find homes where they are loved.

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