



Divorce and the Special Needs Child

A DIVORCE COMES WITH MANY CHALLENGES, BUT THEY ARE truly magnified when the family has a child with special needs. There is so much to consider, not just pertaining to the home situation but also to school. The key is to have a plan in place before you begin the divorce process. The following tips are geared towards high-functioning autistic (HFA) children.

HOME

- » Use a picture book about divorce to guide discussion.
- » Monitor the child's frustration level.
- » Make transitions as smooth as possible from house to house.
- » Keep household rules the same at each house.
- » If working with incentives, keep them the same at each house.
- » Work with a co-parenting coach who has experience with HFA children.
- » Hire an attorney who has experience with special needs.
- » If needed, have your child see a therapist trained in special needs.
- » Be aware that the child's anxiety will escalate.
- » Work on the parenting plan with someone who understands HFA children.
- » If needed, get a guardian ad litem to advocate for the child.
- » Keep caregivers the same.
- » Equip both homes with a set of books and school supplies.
- » Encourage extracurricular activities.
- » Have a visual visitation calendar in the child's room that shows with pictures the days the child will be with Mom or Dad and activities.
- » Use the tools of scripting and/or cartooning.
- » Take care of your own needs.



SCHOOL

- » Meet with the school counselor and teachers to notify them of the divorce and to go over possible resources.
- » Monitor the child's frustration level.
- » Review classroom setup to ensure the child is sitting in the best possible place to feel secure.
- » Discuss having a "social buddy" or aide.
- » Have ongoing communication with the teacher about home and school behaviors.
- » Brainstorm how transitions will be handled in the classroom.

RESOURCES

- » autismspeaks.org
- » myaspergerschild.com
- » iide.indiana.edu/irca
- » sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/divorce/
- » aaml.org
- » Search "best practices in handling family law cases involving children with special needs."

Remember, consistency, support, reassurance and love will be the keys to help your child navigate this difficult time for him/her.

DEBBIE MARTINEZ, MA, is a certified life coach specializing in divorce. As a Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Mediator trained in collaborative divorce, Debbie gives clients the tools they need to successfully untie the knot and stand strong in the wake of adversity. You can reach Debbie at 305.984.5121, transformationthrudivorce.com or debbie@transformationthrudivorce.com.

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