

Review: Books about Divorce for Children

By Lily Hoffman-Andrews

Each year, one million children in the United States see their parents go through divorce. There's no shortage of books on the difficult subject of kids and divorce, but some parents may find it overwhelming to pick the resources that are best-suited to their children's situation. The truth is, some of the available books are exceptional, while some of them are only so-so. The reviews below are offered to parents going through divorce to help them choose.

Dinosaurs Divorce, by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. (New York: Little Brown, 1986.) The title may sound cheesy, but this book is by far the best of the books for younger children. The illustrations (done by the same person as the popular *Arthur* series) are funny, and the text offers concrete solutions to common problems kids will face during a divorce. The authors manage to simplify situations in a way that kids can understand without oversimplifying them or sounding condescending, a task that some of the other books don't manage. (Ages 4-12, but older kids may enjoy it as well.)

When Your Parents Split Up...How to Keep Yourself Together by Alys Swan-Jackson. With material from Lynn Rosenfield and Joan Shapiro. (New York: Price Stern Sloan, 1997.) This book has just the right balance of guidance from professionals and from kids. The author does not try to interpret the kids' responses; she lets them speak for themselves, and then adds a few comments of her own. This is a sort of *Dinosaur's Divorce* for older kids: it offers specific, simple advice on how to deal with problems that most kids are going through during a divorce. The young people interviewed are a variety of ages and have many different views and situations, giving the book a balanced perspective. (Ages 12-19)

Let's Talk About It: Divorce, by Fred Rogers. (New York: G. Putnam & Sons, 1996.) This is just the kind of book one would expect from Mister Rogers: kind, reassuring, and simple. You can almost hear that homey accent as you read it. Although this book does not deal with many specific problems that children might have, young kids will probably find it comforting, especially since the words come from a figure that may be familiar to them. (Ages 3-8)

Help! A Girl's Guide to Divorce and Stepfamilies by Nancy Holyoke. (Middleton, Wisconsin: Pleasant Company, 1999.) This book, addressed to older children and teenagers, features letters written over the years to the popular magazine *American Girl* about divorce. The answers are extremely helpful, kind, and specific. In fact, I think it's a little unfair that it limits itself to girls – it's a very good book that both genders could benefit from reading. (Ages 8-15)

I Don't Want To Talk About It by Jeanie Franz Ransom. Illustrated by Kathryn Kunz Finney. (Washington, DC: Magination, 2000.) This book takes the form of a story, with two parents telling their child about the ramifications of their divorce (e.g. changes in living situation) while the child imagines herself to be different animals to try and cope with her emotions. The book may validate the feelings that a child has about a divorce. The illustrations are attractive but can be dizzying, because the rooms are often intentionally slanted and the perspective is strange. There's a "Note to Parents" afterword by Philip Stahl, PhD, that offers some ideas for parents. The afterword is fairly comprehensive for two pages, but cannot be expected to be the only resource needed for a parent. (Ages 5-10)

How It Feels When Parents Divorce by Jill Krementz. (New York: Knopf, 1984.) Nineteen children, ranging in age from seven to sixteen, talk about their experiences with divorce. The

book is much more forceful because the words are coming directly from the children. It will help parents because they can get a feel for what their children might be experiencing, and children because they can find out they're not alone in how they feel, and maybe some advice for dealing with their problems. This book is also helpful because it addresses some issues that aren't discussed in the other books for children. One boy is conflicted about his parents' divorce because he is Catholic and his religion disapproves. Another boy has been involved in what he calls "snatches" – the non-custodial parent violated the custody agreement and took him from his home with the custodial parent. Another has experienced other children saying hurtful things about his being a child of divorce, and yet another is being taken care of by his grandparents after his parents' divorce. (Ages 10-19)

How to Survive Your Parents' Divorce by Nancy O'Keefe Bolick. (New York: Franklin Watts, 1994.) I found this book intensely annoying. Like the two previous books, it offers perspectives from children. However, it is only partially "by kids and for kids", as the back of the book claims. The author follows the children's comments with her own interpretations of what they said – sometimes even contradicting the children's words. I don't feel like *anyone* is qualified to do that; these words are coming from the children themselves, and only they truly know what they are feeling. Even if they may not be speaking the whole truth, I don't believe it's up to any adult to "translate" the kids' words. (Ages 13-19)

How Tía Lola Came to Visit Stay by Julia Alvarez. (New York: Knopf, 2001.) This book is a story of a 10-year-old boy named Miguel whose parents divorce. He moves to Vermont from New York with his mother and little sister. Soon his crazy Tía (Aunt) Lola joins them. This book isn't just about divorce – it has lots of lessons to teach about home, identity, and family. Although the ways in which it teaches them can be sometimes heavy-handed, in general, this is a well-written book with an engaging story. It's also spiced up with Spanish words and the culture of the Dominican Republic, where Miguel's parents and aunt grew up. (Ages 10-14)

Magic Words Handbook for Kids by Kent Winchester. (Albuquerque, NM: LadyBug Press, 1998.) There's nothing fancy about this book, by any means. It also might be hard to find – we bought it directly from the seller at amazon.com. But if you do find it, you're lucky—it's a real gem. It's a book of small mantras for children (and teenagers) to repeat, such as: "Mom and Dad can take care of themselves. I don't have to" and "It's OK to be sad" along with explanations of why these words are true and important. Saying things aloud can often make them seem more real, and this book encourages kids to say these words to themselves whenever they need to. (Ages 6-14)

It's Not Your Fault, KoKo Bear by Vicki Lanksy. (Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers, 1998.) This book, billed as "A read-together book for parents and young children during divorce", is more a tool to facilitate parent-child conversation than anything else. If you're a parent who can't think of what to say to your child, this book will help you—most of the book consists of conversations KoKo bear has with his/her parents (the book carefully avoids pronouns when referring to the protagonist). KoKo's parents have wise things to say, and the small boxes at the bottom of each page give parenting advice, too. (Ages 4-10)

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