

# How to Make Kids Feel at Home in Both Homes After a Divorce

When parents go their separate ways in a divorce, children are torn between two places — both should feel like home.



By Hanna Ingber

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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 Dr. 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 A. Ross, the executive director of a parenting education organization, Parenting Horizons. “Kids wonder, ‘Can my parents divorce me?’”



Moves can be hard on everyone, especially kids. My children, Aarav (now almost 6) and Isaac Yerasi (now 8), have been most concerned that their Legos be handled with care. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

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

“Physical space is a concrete representation of emotional space,” she said.

Here’s a guide to help parents facing this. It includes best practices from co-parenting experts and tips from parents who wrote to us about how they made it work.

## 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,” Dr. Blackstone said.

Jerome A. Scharoff, a divorce attorney and father in Merrick, N.Y., 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.

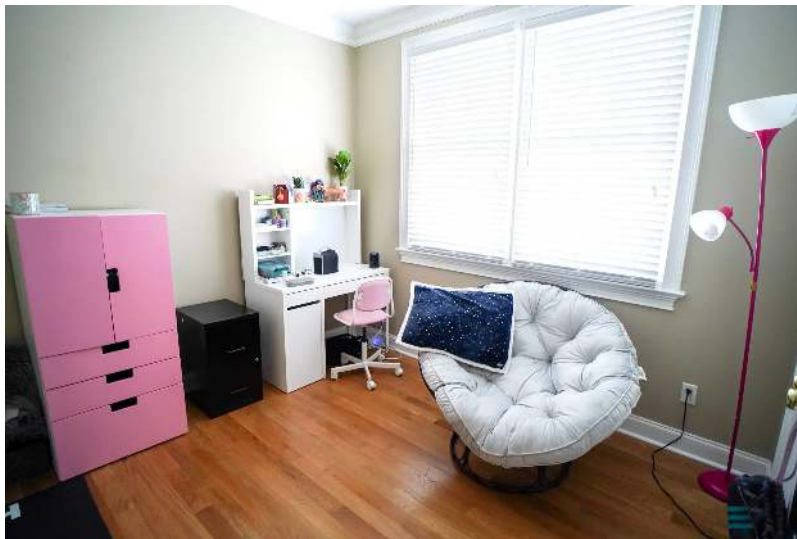


Kay Thomas and her daughter, Kathryn Olivia Banks, at their home in Columbia, S.C. Kathryn was involved in setting up her bedroom in both her parents’ homes. She decided which toys, books and stuffed animals would stay at her father’s, and how she would set up her new room at her mother’s. Sean Rayford for The New York Times

## 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 these books contained, 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.



Kay Thomas created a bedroom and study room for her daughter at her new house. “It really is about creating two homes for this child that they feel safe in, where they belong — that they’re not just passing through,” said Julie A. Ross, the executive director of Parenting Horizons. Sean Rayford for The New York Times

## 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.

Ms. 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.





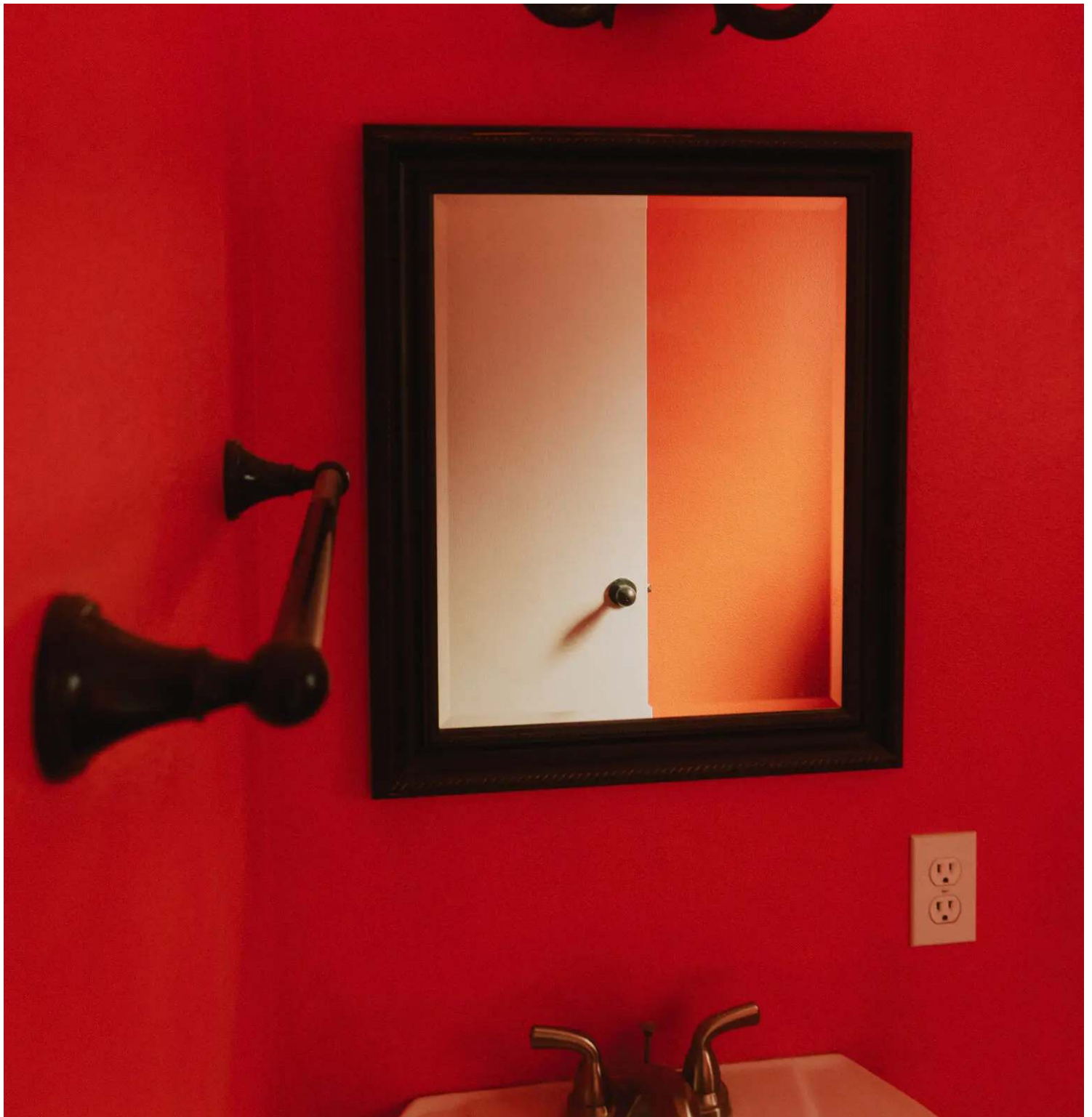
Ann Reitan and her son, Christian Reitan, at their home in Bend, Ore. Ms. Reitan says that after her husband left nine years ago, her son worried about the family. Now 18, Christian is doing great — he’s a college-bound high school senior and earned the rank of Eagle Scout in 2021. Mason Trinca for The New York Times

### 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, Ore., 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,” Ms. 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.”

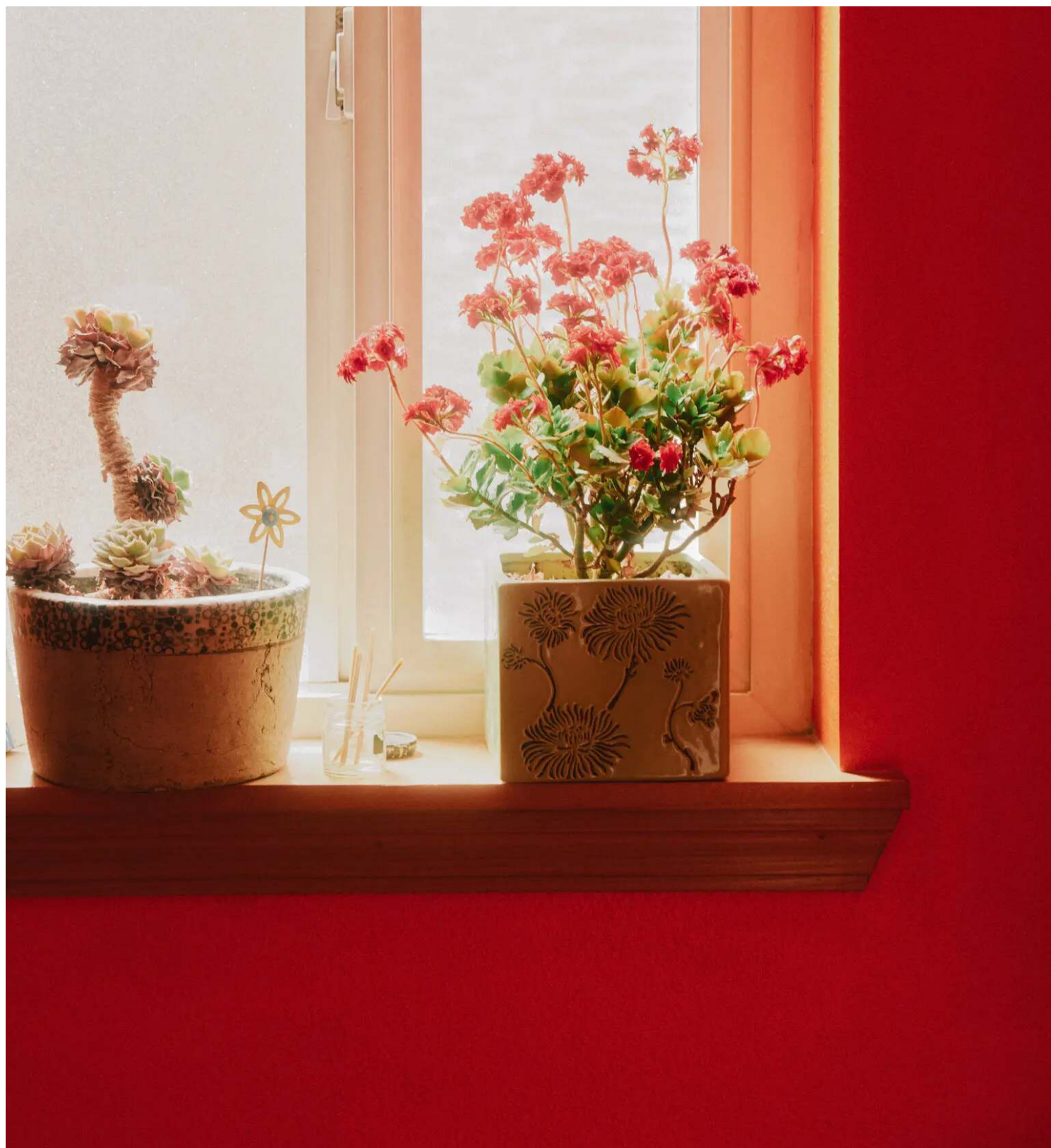




Ann Reitan let her son, then 9, choose the paint color for their new home's bathroom. Mason Trinca for The New York Times







“He was involved as much as possible and as much as he chose,” Ms. Reitan said of her son’s involvement. Mason Trinca for The New York Times

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. Dr. Thomas has since founded an organization and a podcast to help those going through divorce.

Stephanie Somogyi in Chatham, N.J., said that she also involved her three children in choosing furniture and paint colors for their new home. “It worked great because they were completely invested and excited,” she wrote.

## Make it fun

Divorce — fun? It's worth trying.

Victoria Shestack Aronoff in Maplewood, N.J., said that the hardest part was how she was perceiving their change in circumstances. “I worried endlessly about how we were moving from a big, wonderful house to a small, crappy apartment,” she wrote.

But she tried to sound excited about the change, telling her children: “Look, your room is already painted blue with butterflies! Look, the living room is brown and orange!” (Hideous then and still hideous 10 years later.) “Wow, we share a backyard with three other people, how fun!!”

She said her children, then 3 and 6, loved the new place and followed her cue that it was a “wonderland.”



Ann Reitan let her son, Christian, choose his bedroom's paint color and bed. Mason Trinca for The New York Times

## 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,” Dr. 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 stepfamily 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. A request from the 11-year-old me: If you become a stepparent and do the grocery shopping, ask your stepchildren what kind of food they want in the fridge.

## Don't battle over rules

This may be a tad controversial, but forget about having the same rules in both houses. If you and your ex could agree on how to parent, you probably wouldn't be getting divorced. Also, while I may be slightly traumatized by the grape jelly situation, I can confirm that I grew up with totally different rules in my parents' homes, and it didn't affect me. My dad let us stay up late, watch R-rated movies and shower not so much — awesome.

Ms. Ross said that other than safety issues, when parents try to have the same rules at both houses, it leads to unnecessary conflict. Parents battling about things like chores or bedtime, she said, risks forcing the children to choose one side and possibly feeling disloyal to the other parent.

Some worry that this could cause confusion, but Ms. Ross said she thinks children can handle that.

“Children live all the time with different rules,” she said. “The rules at school are slightly different than the rules at home, and they adjust to that.”

## Consider college-age children

A reader asked that we address how divorcing parents who have young adult children should handle this.

Dr. Blackstone said that it can be upsetting and confusing for those whose parents separate when they are off at college. “Imagine coming home on the holidays and not knowing where to go,” she said.

This age group might also feel like the separation changes everything they believed about their childhood, Ms. Ross said.

They suggested that those parents sit down with their adult children and talk it through, acknowledging that it must be difficult for them.

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.

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*Hanna Ingber, an editor at The New York Times, writes about parenting and life after divorce.*

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