

Helping Children Cope with Divorce
By
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The United States has the highest divorce rate among Western nations. In the 1990's, it was predicted that 40% of all American children would experience a parental divorce. Divorce can have serious psychological consequences and for some children, it is even more devastating than the death of a parent.

Divorce is not a simple, isolated event, but an ongoing process that exacts change in the psychological, social and economic life of children. Divorce often begins with an acute disruption involving intense emotion and high conflict between parents. This stage often lasts for about one year after the divorce has been finalized. The next stage is one of transition in which the initial upheaval has diminished and family members reorganize, developing new routines and patterns. The final stage of adjustment is reached when the post-divorce family establishes a stable home and lifestyle.

In order for children to successfully adjust to their parent's divorce, the reality of the breakup needs to be acknowledged, parental conflict needs to be effectively resolved and new supports need to be established.

Research indicates that many factors influence a child's post-divorce adjustment including temperament, age, gender, access to the non-custodial parent, the emotional availability of both parents, and the stability of the post-divorce home environment. The single most critical factor, however, is the level of post-divorce parental conflict. Study after study has found that the more intense, pervasive and openly hostile the conflict between the parents, the greater the psychological damage to the children.

Children of divorce need permission to love both parents and to be loved by both parents. Chronic arguing frequently places children in the middle their parent's disputes and interrupts many of the normative psychological tasks of development. Moreover, such conflict alters parent-child relationships because the needs of the parent assume dominance over the needs of the child. When this occurs, security gives way to anxiety and the child's sense of well-being dissolves into feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

While each child reacts to parental divorce in a unique way, in our practice, we advise parents to look for some common signs of emotional upset. These include abrupt changes in personality, such as an active child becoming withdrawn or a quiet child becoming aggressive. Younger children often will exhibit regressive behavior, such as when toilet trained children soil or wet their pants or when children return to thumb sucking or blanket holding for security. Some children become depressed in the face of parental divorce and experience nightmares or other sleep or appetite disturbances. More serious emotional reactions include intense anger, thoughts or threats of suicide, cruelty to animals or fighting with other children.

A child's age will also affect his/her reaction to divorce. Children under the age of five years are usually too young to understand the content or context of parental conflict. Children of this age are, however, extremely sensitive to parental tension and angry voices. When young children hear their parents yell and argue, it can create a fear that the people who keep them safe, who protect them, are out of control. This, in turn, creates fear, insecurity and helplessness. In the face of these emotions, young children respond by crying and clinging to parents for reassurance. In more severe cases the young child may develop a sleep disturbance, experience nightmares, have temper outbursts, and exhibit confused behavior.

Five- and six-year-old children are able to formulate very simplistic understandings of the content of arguments. They are not, however, cognitively sophisticated enough to realize that they are not the cause of their parents' disputes. Children of this age struggle to make sense out of their lives and often tend to blame themselves for their parent's divorce. These children also become very concerned about whether their basic needs will be met and they often work desperately to make their parents stop fighting in order to enhance their own feelings of safety and security. When unable to resolve parental disputes, children of this age will often begin to experience self-doubt and develop distrust of the adult world.

Seven- to nine-year-old children tend to involve themselves in parental conflict by taking sides with one parent against the other or by attempting to maintain simultaneous alliance with each parent. Children of this age often experience strong feelings of sadness, loss, rejection, and guilt in response to parental divorce. Their emotional upset often is exhibited through tense, anxious behavior, difficulty concentrating, somatic complaints, and crankiness.

Nine to twelve year olds are better able to understand the content of parental conflict. While their understanding is likely to be incomplete and flawed, they are still inclined to make judgments regarding who is responsible for the marital problems and to blame that parent for disrupting their lives. These children tend to feel alone and frightened when their parents divorce. Peers play an increasingly important role in their lives and they are apt to feel embarrassed when their parents divorce, because it makes them feel different from their peers. These children are particularly threatened by the possibility of losing friends and changing schools. They may express emotional upset by opposing parental expectations and behaving defiantly.

For adolescents the major developmental task involves separating from one's parents and establishing a stable, consistent and unique personal identity. Divorce interferes with this process if the teenager is either pulled back into the family to provide support or is abruptly pushed to separate from either parent. Adolescents are keenly sensitive to the attention they receive and are quick to resent what feels like a lack of attention. They also make stronger judgments about parental behaviors and display a lack of respect when a parent fails to live up to their idealized standards. In these circumstances, teenagers sometimes pull away from their parents when the parents do

not live up to the youth's expectations. Pulling away typically involves rejecting parental guidance, advice or support.

Children of all ages have questions, concerns, fears, and desires that they experience during and after the divorce process. In working with these children, we support their adjustment by providing a safe and accepting environment where they can discuss their private thoughts and feelings, particularly those they may feel uncomfortable sharing with their parents. In addition, we attempt to normalize their situation by helping them accept their feelings and by relating how other children have coped in similar circumstances.

We also work with parents to help them stabilize their children's environment. Among the most important steps parents' can take involves resolving the hostility and conflict with their ex-spouse.

Finally, when working with children from divorced families, we endeavor to convey a sense of hope and optimism that their lives will improve as their sadness becomes less painful, while realistically discussing the problems they may encounter in the future.

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