

Helping your Child through Divorce

Though divorce may be a constructive solution for a discordant marriage and help to diffuse the immediate hostilities, for most children the tensions often worsen and persist beyond the initial divorce stage.

The immediate disruptive effect of divorce itself is only the first step in a series of changes in child's life. Children continue to deal with changes brought on by divorce as they intellectually and emotionally mature.

Though temperament, age, developmental level, and the support of family and friends are important to the child's adjustment to the divorce, the most important factor in the child's outcome is what is constructed in its place. The effect of divorce ultimately reflects the success or failure of the parent to master not only the immediate disruption but also to negotiate the later transitions successfully.

In helping children in divorce, one needs to manage it as a continual process. It is also helpful to see divorce in terms of the child's age and in terms of stages. The stages of divorce are 1) Early Adjustment Period (including informing the children) 2) Developmental Gradual adjustment to new living situation post -divorce 3) possible adjustments to new relations in stepfamilies.

Early Adjustment Period

The divorce is the termination of the family unit, and like any termination of important relationships is characterized by painful loss for children. Children being dependants also feel a significant loss of security. How the child normally reacts in the acute stages of the divorce is often very predictable and age dependant.

Preschool children in the early stages of divorce often manifest regressive type behaviors. The child may lose a previously mastered toilet training behavior, return to thumb sucking, or increase masturbation behavior. They may have sleep disturbances with fears of abandonment upon awakening. They may develop separation fears, refusing to go nursery school, or play with peers. They also may be more aggressive towards peers or siblings. Play may involve elaborate themes of childcare.

Children 6 to 8 years old in the early stages of divorce are more likely to show open sobbing and grieving. They will show more preoccupations that are open with feelings of rejection and longing for the long lost parent. Girls may especially have Madame Butterfly fantasies, believing their long lost parent will return someday to rescue them.

Children 6 to 8 years old may show conflicting loyalties to each parent, displaying feelings of guilt when returning to each parent's household. When the child is visiting the noncustodial parent, the child may be on their best behavior for fear the parental abandonment. Upon returning to the custodial parent, they will often become irritable as a reaction to the strain. They also may become fearful expressing anger to either parent. Boy's may especially feel vulnerable to the mother's anger for fear of being "thrown out like Dad" Because of these stresses' children often have decrease school performance.

Children 9 to 12 years old in the early stages of divorce though very fearful often put on an act of nonchalance or disinterest. Others may show frank anger towards one or both parents. In their own sense of powerlessness, they may cast one parent in the role of the "good parent" and the other in the role of the "bad parent." They are easily co-opted by one parent against the other. They may even take the role of an adult or parent towards this troubled parent. There may also have deterioration in the schoolwork or peer relations.

Adolescents in the early stages of divorce take a worldlier look at the divorce. They may question the world's moralities and values, as they try to reorganize their opinions of the world. Adolescents may

worry about their own fates in future relationships. They may also be appropriately concerned about their abilities to pursue future occupational or educational plans. Rather than worry some adolescents may instead develop a premature degree of emotional autonomy as a way of dealing with the divorce. Adolescents are at greater risk for depression and suicide including those with previously good psychological health. They may also act out more, be more sexually promiscuous, and abuse drugs and alcohol.

How to inform the children and how to help children in the early stage of divorce

Disclosure of the impending divorce should occur well in advance of the parent's departure. When given proper information in advance, children are significantly calmer and have better understanding and trust of their parents. Failure to inform children has a more devastating effect on children and causes them to lose trust. The purpose of the initial discussion should be to explain the divorce so it is understood as a rational step, and to prepare them for the changes that are to come. The communication line should be left open and questions should be encouraged.

The children should understand what divorce is, and how it will change their living arrangements. Make sure the children know that you are not divorcing them. They should be told emphatically that they will be cared for in the present and future, and will not be lost in the shuffle. They need to be told that their relationship with each parent will endure, and the visitations with the noncustodial parent be explained. The frequency of the visits should be based on the needs of the child, and should not be determined by the degree of conflict, nor the parents "right to access."

Children should be informed of the reason for the divorce and reassured that their parents have carefully exhausted every resource, before making such a weighty decision. The explanation should be appropriate to the child's age and level of understanding. Young children should be told that the parents are unhappy and fighting and the purpose of the divorce is to bring an end to the unhappiness and fighting. Older children should be informed of the various attempts the parents made to resolve their conflicts and the parent's disappointment and sorrow with their marriage failure. Details of sexual infidelity are not helpful to children to know, however if the child is aware of the infidelity it should be presented as a symptom of unhappiness within the marriage.

Finally, children need to know that they are not the cause of the divorce. They need to know that previous parental disagreements over child management were parental disagreements, and not directed at their behavior. They need to be reassured that they will not have to take sides and they should be given permission to love both parents. They should be told that they should expect a return to order and familiar routines following the transitional period. In time, the children should be informed that the divorce does not predestine children to fail in future relationships.

In helping *the preschool child* after the disclosure, every attempt should be made to maintaining routines. They should be told repeatedly the parent loves them and will continue to care for them. At each separation, the child should be told when the parent will return. At bedtime, spend additional time with bedtime rituals and routines. The child should be told where the parent will be when they go to sleep and awaken. It is wise for the parent to be present throughout the evening during the first few weeks of the separation. Restoration of other routines should also occur (preschool, friends, and neighbors). Restoration of contact with the noncustodial parent should be urged. Arguing, fighting, and disagreements between parents should not be in the presence of the child.

In children 6 to 8 years, it is important to give them permission to love both parents without the feeling of being called upon to make choices in the marital conflict. Arguing, fighting, and disagreements between parents should not be in the presence of the child. The parents should make it easy for the children to cross back and forth between the parents. Children should be reassured that the parents will continue to take care of themselves and will continue to take care of the children. Routines need to be reestablished (school, friends, neighbors, household routines).

Children 9 to 12 years old should not be involved in the parental disputes. Parents should realize that children probably do not understand issues despite their pseudosophisticated remarks. Arguing, fighting, and disagreements that do occur between parents should not be in the presence of the child. The children should be helped to perceive the unhappiness that underlies their bravado, anger and false disinterest. The children in this age group are vulnerable to sexual overstimulation and should not be given the role of confidant regarding parental love affairs. Again, customary routines need to be reestablished (school, friends, neighbors, household routines).

Adolescents often look to their peers and other adult figures for advice. If the adolescent is not open to the parent, they should be allowed to talk to another adult or even a therapist. The adolescent may require time to de-idealize their parents, and see their parents simply as adults who also make mistakes. Serious wide ranging discussions should be allowed about the impact of divorce on them as well as their future plans. The adolescent should be provided with some protection and encouragement to pursue their age appropriate interests. The adolescent should be reassured that the parent's divorce does not put them at risk for divorce. Suicidal thoughts and acting out behaviors should be taken seriously.

Get help for yourself. Address any depression and anger you may have. Do not displace these feelings or project them onto the child. Do not lean on the child as a friend/confidant. Keep your role as the parent intact. Seek local divorce support groups or those for single parents. Use alliances with the child's schoolteacher for monitoring the child's behavior. Take advantage of friends/ neighborhood parents and grandparents who want to help.

Developmental and Gradual adjustments to the new living situation.

The drama, complexity and scope of the changes brought about by divorce exceed the expectation of many of the participants. Often the period of dysequilibrium in the lives of the family members last often up to several years and divorce continues to evoke strong emotions into adulthood. The average time required by divorced woman to establish a sense of continuity and stability is 3 to 4 years, while men often require 2 to 3 years.

The long-term adjustments to new living situations are more complex and less predictable than in earlier stages. Unlike the earlier periods, the latter adjustments will more likely impact long-term psychological and social outcome. An overview of the management of divorce in later years is beyond the scope of this handout, but in short should be individualized to child's need. Discussions should be ongoing and should take into considerations the child's emerging emotional and intellectual development.

Despite uncertainties in the later years, what is certain is that the relationship of children with **both** parents does not lessen in emotional importance for the child over the years.

Long-term outcomes for the children can be improved if

- 1) Parents are able to resolve and put aside the anger and conflicts, and make use of the relief provided in the divorce.**
- 2) Parents can continue to provide emotional and physical availability for the children**
- 3) Children do not feel rejected in the relationship with the noncustodial parent.**
- 4) Regular visits continue with the noncustodial parent and the extent it keeps pace with the child's growth.**
- 5) The availability to the child of a supportive family network that include siblings and extended family members.**
- 6) The absence of continued anger and or depression by the child or family members.**
- 7) The developmental needs of the child are met relative to their age and sex.**
- 8) Coexisting medical and psychological problems of the parents and children are treated**

Of special consideration are children who have witnessed or have been a victim of abuse. Issues may show up early on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or later in adolescence as relationship difficulties. Abuse issues need to come to the attention of the Pediatrician.

Stepparents and stepchildren

New relationships, blended families, and remarriage are among the most difficult tasks facing children of divorce. Children get into territorial issues with other stepchildren and stepparents. Children may be especially disturbed because they may feel they are being called on to betray their love of a parent and to substitute the stepparent in their place. Generally, it is better and easier for all concerned if the stepparent is given a special name, not "mother" or "father."

Generally, younger children adopt new stepfamily more easily, while older children require more time. It is unrealistic to expect the children (or anyone else) to enter into new relationships automatically. Relationships take time to develop. Room and patience are required. It is also unrealistic to expect children to be on the parent's time line and to have their needs and parent's needs converging simultaneously.

As children begin to integrate into the new family they should be allowed respect earlier family histories, ceremonies and loyalties. From time to time special time should be set-aside for this.

Children who successfully adopt new stepfamilies **do not** turn away from parents that continue to visit.

Because not all divorces are mutual decisions, it is recognized that not all parents will fully cooperate in the childcare issues. Despite this sometime unfortunate reality, it is never the less important for both parents to understand the divorce from the child perspective. Though the amount of time a child may spend with an individual parent may change after the divorce it's important to the child that visitations continue.

Suggested Readings

For Parents

Gardner RA The Parents book of Divorce (rev ed.) New York: Bantam Books 1991

Teyber E Helping children with Divorce New York : Lexington Books, 1992

Kalter N. Growing up Divorced New York: Free Press, 1990

For Children

Ives SB, Fassler D, Lash M. The Divorce Workbook: A Guide for Kids and Families Burlington VT: Waterfront Books, 1985

Kids Express PO Box 782, Littleton CO 80160-0782

A monthly newsletter for children whose parents have divorced or separated

Leshan E. When Parents Separate or Divorce: What's is going to happen to me ?New York: Allandin Books 1978

Bibliographies

Steven Parker and Barry Zuckerman Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics 1995 Lippincott and Williams Philadelphia

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Melvin Levine M.D., W.B. Saunders