

The Effects of Divorce on Children



Parents who are going through divorce often believe that shielding children from the stress of the situation is in the children's best interest. But regardless of their parents' good intentions, children often find themselves caught in an emotional whirlpool during these times. Instead of protection, they need support and reassurance during this temporarily stressful time. This guide will help you understand the stress that children often feel when their parents divorce.

A Common Understanding What Causes Stress for Children?

Parents dealing with a divorce want to protect their children from the same stress and anguish they feel. But avoiding the issue only adds to the stress. Parents need to help their children understand that the family will learn to adapt to new schedules, new environments, and new ways of communicating. Only then can parents begin to relieve some of the accompanying stress for children.

Individual adult reactions to divorce and separation vary. Children's reactions vary also, depending on

- the amount of involvement with the nonresidential parent
- the situation before the divorce or separation
- the residential parent's ease in adjusting to the divorce
- parenting skills of both parents, agreement on child rearing, and discipline
- approval and love from both parents
- openness to discussing the divorce with parents
- degree of conflict between parents
- economic hardship
- other added stressors (moving, changing schools, parental remarriage).

1. The family they have always known will be different.

One of the biggest fears for children is change. With divorce, changes will occur in many household responsibilities. Children may have to adjust to new schedules, new homework, mealtime, and bedtime routines. They may no longer have contact with some friends and extended family members (such as grandparents or cousins).

2. Loss of attachment.

Children become attached to parents, brothers, sisters, and pets. Changes in how much contact occurs with any of these can cause some distress. Having a different bedroom and being away from familiar possessions also create stress.

3. Fear of abandonment.

Children fear that if they have lost one parent, they may lose the other. They may blame themselves, feel unlovable, or not feel safe. They worry about who will take care of them and even who will pick them up from child care or from school. Even children whose parents are not divorcing may hear friends talk about divorce and create confusion and fear for themselves.

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4. Hostility between parents.

Arguments and tension between parents may make children feel guilty, angry, and alone. Trying to make the children take sides or turn against the other parent creates confusion for the children and places them in the middle of an adult struggle. It is important to let the children make up their own minds about their parents.

Children's reactions to stress may vary from relief and complete acceptance to great sadness, anger, or anxiety. Parents will see signs of children's stress in many of their words and actions.

Following are some typical reactions and suggestions for how parents can help children cope.

Infants

What the child understands

Does not understand conflict, but may react to changes in parent's energy level and mood.

Possible child reactions

Loss of appetite.
Upset stomach — may spit up more.
More fretful or anxious.

Strategies for parents

Keep normal routines.
Remain calm in front of the child.
Seek help from family and friends.
Rest when the child rests.
Maintain warm, safe contact.
Do not deprive the child of his or her favorite toys, blanket, or stuffed animal.

May hold anger inside.
Feels that he or she should be punished.
May be accident prone.
May become aggressive and angry toward parent he or she lives with.
May have more nightmares.
Experiences feelings of grief because of sudden absence of parent.

Strategies for parents

Encourage the child to talk.
Use books to help the child talk about feelings.
Set aside "child time" each day.
Tell the child repeatedly that he or she is not responsible for the divorce or separation and that he or she will be taken care of.
Tell the child he or she will be safe.
Let noncustodial parent maintain a regular presence (a phone call several times each week, messages sent on video or audio tapes).
Assure the child that he or she will be able to visit with the other parent.
Allow more unhurried time every day.

See if the school or community has special programs for children of divorce.
Plan special time together.
Reassure your child that everything will be all right, just different.
Keep daily routines intact.
Respect, but monitor, the child's privacy.
Don't dwell on adult problems.
Encourage the child to say how he or she feels, but don't use expressions such as "be brave" or "don't cry."

Toddlers

What the child understands

Understands that a parent has moved away, but doesn't understand why.

Possible child reactions

More crying, clinging.
Problems sleeping.
Regression to infant behaviors (back to diapers, thumbsucking).
May feel anger, may not understand why he or she feels that way.
May worry when parent is out of sight.
May withdraw, bite, or be irritable.

Strategies for parents

Stick to routines.
Be reassuring, nurturing.
Allow some return to infantile behaviors, but set clear limits.
Try not to be in a hurry all the time.
Spend time alone with the child (cuddle, read).
Give the child time with another responsive adult (grandparent, close friend).

Early elementary

What the child understands

Begins to understand what a divorce is.
Understands that her or his parents won't live together anymore and that they may not love each other as before.

Possible child reactions

Feels deceived and feels a sense of loss.
Hopes parents will get back together.
Feels rejected by the parent who left.
Ignores school and friendships.
Worries about the future.
Fears nobody will be there to pick him or her up from school.
Complains of headaches or stomach aches.
Has trouble sleeping.
Tries to recreate "what was."
Experiences loss of appetite, sleep problems, diarrhea, frequent urination.

Strategies for parents

Encourage the child to talk about how he or she feels.
Answer all questions about the changes that are taking place, and keep lines of communication open.
Be sensitive to signs of depression and fear. Seek professional help if depression is prolonged or intense.

Preteen and adolescents

What the child understands

Understands but doesn't accept the divorce.

Possible child reactions

Feels angry and disillusioned.
Feels abandoned by the parent who is leaving.
Tries to take advantage of parents' low energy and high stress levels.
Tries to take control over family.
Shows extreme behavior (good and bad).
Becomes moralistic, or becomes involved in high-risk behaviors (drugs, shoplifting, skipping school).
Tries to be an "angel" to bring the family back together.
May try to cut one or both parents out of her or his life if she or he feels rejected.
Feels like he or she will never be able to have a long-term relationship.
Feels like he or she must grow up too soon.
Worries about finances, including college tuition.

Strategies for parents

Continue to talk about each step of the divorce.
Maintain two-way communication.
Keep routines and maintain rules.
Remind the child that the parents "own" the problem, and free him or her from guilt.
Continue to monitor the child's activities.
Don't involve the child in parental struggles.
Don't use the child as a replacement partner. (Don't discuss adult problems with him or her.)
Consider joint counseling.

Preschoolers

What the child understands

Doesn't understand what separation or divorce means. Realizes one parent is not as active in his or her life.

Possible child reactions

Has pleasant and unpleasant fantasies.
Feels uncertain about the future.
May feel responsible.

More Strategies for Parents

Books

Children often can deal with feelings by relating to characters in a story. If a child reads about characters in a book experiencing the same feelings that the child is experiencing, then the child will not feel so alone. Stories, whether told aloud or read from a book, can serve as a non-threatening buffer to stress. This strategy works for both older and younger children.

By taking time to read or tell stories together, you can help your child feel safe and close. After completing a story, find ways to open conversation. Allow the child to process the content, then share thoughts. Often children will talk about characters, not themselves. At some point the emphasis shifts from the book to the shared experience. Children often can make the leap from the story to their lives. If this does not happen, open-ended questions (How did Max feel? Why?) can be used to see if the child is ready to talk.

At the library, ask for assistance in selecting books to match the emotion, not just the event (loss, death, moving, survival, fear, anxiety). Good examples for school-age children include *Island of the Blue Dolphin* (about coping) and *Little House on the Prairie* (about adversity, loss, staying together as a family). Parents and children can also share feelings by looking at family photographs and family videotapes.

Play

Particularly for young children, play is the primary means of expressing feelings. Sometimes parents can tell how children are feeling by watching their play or playing with them.

Take care not to impose your opinions on the child's feelings during play. Join in play only if asked. If your child feels you are directing instead of just playing, he or she will feel uncomfortable. Some play items that help elicit feelings include sand, water, board games, painting, finger paints, chalkboard drawing, play dough, and puppets.

Talking

Sometimes parents have a hard time picking the right words to discuss sensitive issues with children.

Here are some conversation starters to help you describe what is happening in the family:

- A separation is when parents decide to live apart from each other and figure out what to do about their marriage.
- A separation is a hard thing to talk about. It's not always easy telling people that your mom and dad are not living together anymore.
- We are not alone. We have other friends and family, too.
- Sometimes kids feel caught in the middle during a separation.
- Usually children want their parents to stay together. But sometimes things feel so bad that children wish their parents would separate.
- Sometimes things are better for a family when parents decide to separate.

- My leaving is not connected to loving you. I am leaving because your mother/father and I do not get along. I love you as much as ever, and I always will.
- A divorce is when two people decide they no longer want to be married. They can't live together happily anymore. They decide to stop being husband and wife. They just have different ideas about things. We will always be parents to our children.
- One thing never changes. Your mom will always be your mother, and your dad will always be your father. You still have a family when your parents get divorced.
- Kids cannot cause a divorce. They also cannot keep a mom and dad together.
- Being a parent and being a husband or wife are two different (and separate) jobs. Divorce, like marriage, is between adults only.
- When two adults decide to divorce, at least one of them has to go to a courtroom and talk to a judge. The judge helps figure out the rules for the divorce. A lawyer works with the parents and the judge to write up a paper about visiting, living with, and caring for children. The paper says that the adults will no longer be married, but that they will always be parents.

How Long Should the Adjustment Take?

In this fast-paced world, we often get frustrated when we have to wait for things to happen. But going through a transition such as divorce takes time.

Studies show that divorce is indeed a source of stress for children, and it can result in a decline of well-being. On the other hand, some children will breeze through with few negative affects, and some will actually show improvement following divorce.

There are mixed and inconsistent results comparing children's adjustment by age, but most counselors say that children who cope best with divorce are those who, after divorce, continue to have a stable, loving relationship with both parents and regular, dependable visits from the nonresidential parent.

Places to Look for Help

Single Parents

Parents Without Partners (PWP), 401 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611 (312/644-6610). Provides free referrals to local PWP chapters, which offer social and educational opportunities for single parents. Membership fees vary.

Single Parent Resource Center, 141 West 28th Street, New York, NY 10001 (212/947-0221). Offers free referrals for childcare and legal services, as well as information about how to start a single-parent support group.

National Organization of Single Mothers, P.O. Box 68, Midland, NC 28107 (704/888-5437). Provides free advice on how to start support groups and offers referrals to other single parents nationwide. Publishes *Single Mother* magazine (bi-monthly).

National Congress for Men and Children (NCMC), P.O. Box 171675, Kansas City, KS 66117 (800/733-3237). Instructs single fathers on custody, child-support, and paternity issues. Publishes a 132-page manual and a quarterly newsletter called *Network*. Also has a list of NCMC advisers nationwide.

National Fatherhood Initiative, 680 Eden Road, Building E, Lancaster, PA 17601 (800/790-3237). Offers a quarterly newsletter and a catalog of books and videos focusing on fatherhood issues.

Stepparents

The Stepfamily Foundation, 333 West End Avenue, New York, NY 10023 (212/877-3244). Offers workshops on stepfamily dynamics, holds individual and family counseling sessions over the telephone and in person, and publishes lists of audiotapes, and videotapes for stepfamilies.

The Stepfamily Association of America, 215 Centennial Mail South, Suite 212, Lincoln, NE 68508, (800/735-0329). Publishes a quarterly magazine, *Stepfamilies*, and an 89-page book, *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead*. Provides referrals to more than 60 local chapters nationwide. Offers a variety of hard-to-find books, tapes, manuals, and other materials about stepfamilies.

Children's Books on Divorce

For preschoolers and early elementary

All about Divorce, by Mary Blitzer Field, The Center for Applied Psychology, Inc.

Always, Always, by Crescent Dragonwagon, MacMillan.

Annie Stories: A Special Kind of Storytelling, by Judith S. Wallerstein and Doris Brett.

Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide to Changing Families, by Laurene and Marc Brown, Little Brown.

Free to Be ... A Family: A Book About All Kinds of Belongings, by Marlo Thomas, Bantam Books.

Why Are We Getting a Divorce? by Peter Mayle, Crown Publishing.

Daddy Doesn't Live Here Anymore, by R. Turaw.

Months of Sundays, by R. Blue, Franklin Wafts, Inc.

For adolescent and early teens

Angel Face, by Norma Klein, Viking. For ages 12 and up. Presented from a boy's point of view.

The Divorce Express, by Paula Danziger, Delacorte. For ages 12 and up. Presented from a girl's point of view.

Free to Be ... A Family: A Book About All Kinds of Belongings, by Marlo Thomas, Bantam Books.

How It Feels When Parents Divorce, by Jill Krementz, Knopf.

It's Not the End of the World, by Judy Blume, MacMillan.

Talking about Divorce: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child, by Ead Groliman, Beacon.

What's Going to Happen to Me? When Parents Separate or Divorce, by Eda LeShan, Four Winds.

Divorce, by A. Gruasell.

When Mom and Dad Divorce, by S. Nickman.

How to Get It Together When Your Parents Are Coming Apart, by A.K. Richards and I. Willis.

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Prepared by
Karen DeBord, Ph.D., Child Development Specialist.

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