



FOCUS ON KIDS

The Effects of Divorce on Children

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Parents who are going through divorce often believe it is in the best interest of the children to shield them from the stress of the situation. 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. This guide will help you understand the stress that children often feel when their parents divorce.

A common understanding

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 will progress be made to relieve some of the accompanying stress.

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

- The amount of involvement with the non-residential parent,
- The situation prior to the divorce/separation,
- The custodial parent's ease in adjusting to the divorce,

- Parenting skills of both parents, agreement on child rearing, 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).

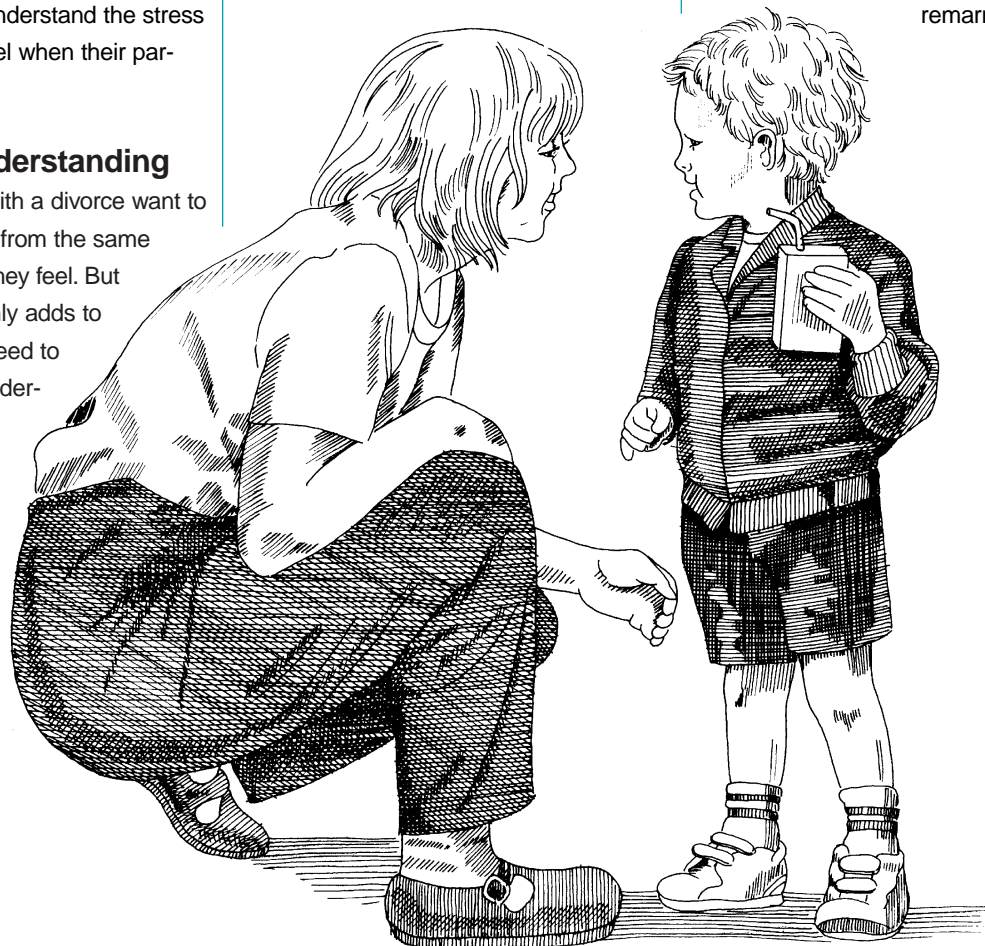


Table 1.

INFANTS	PRESCHOOLERS	EARLY ELEMENTARY
<p><u>WHAT THE CHILD UNDERSTANDS</u> Does not understand conflict, but may react to changes in parents' energy level and mood.</p> <p><u>POSSIBLE CHILD REACTIONS</u> Loss of appetite. Upset stomach — may spit up more. More fretful or anxious.</p> <p><u>STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS</u> Keep normal routines. Remain calm in front of the baby. Get help from family and friends. Rest when the child rests. Maintain warm, safe contact. Do not deprive the child of his/her favorite toys, blanket or stuffed animal.</p>	<p><u>WHAT THE CHILD UNDERSTANDS</u> Doesn't understand what separation or divorce means. Realizes one parent is not as active in their lives.</p> <p><u>POSSIBLE CHILD REACTIONS</u> Pleasant and unpleasant fantasies. Feels uncertain about the future. May feel responsible. May hold anger inside. Feels that he/she should be punished. May be accident prone. May become aggressive and angry toward parent he/she lives with. May have more nightmares. Experiences feelings of grief because of sudden absence of parent.</p> <p><u>STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS</u> Encourage your child to talk. Use books to help your child talk about feelings. Set aside "child time" each day. Tell child repeatedly that he/she is not responsible for the divorce and that he/she will be taken care of. Tell your child he/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 your child that he/she will be able to visit with the other parent. Allow more unhurried time every day.</p>	<p><u>WHAT THE CHILD UNDERSTANDS</u> Begins to understand what a divorce is and understands that her/his parents won't live together anymore and that they don't love each other.</p> <p><u>POSSIBLE CHILD REACTIONS</u> 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/her up from school. Complains of headaches or stomachaches. Has trouble sleeping. Tries to recreate "what was." Experiences loss of appetite, sleep problems, diarrhea, urinary frequency.</p> <p><u>STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS</u> Encourage your child to talk about how he/she feels. Answer all questions about the changes, and keep lines of communication open. Be sensitive to signs of depression and fear — seek professional help if depression is prolonged or intense. See if the school or community has special programs for children of divorce. Plan special time together. Reassure your child that everything will be OK, just different. Keep daily routines intact. Respect, but monitor, your child's privacy. Don't dwell on adult problems. Encourage your child to say how he/she feels, but don't use expressions such as, "be brave" or "don't cry."</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">TODDLERS</p> <p><u>WHAT THE CHILD UNDERSTANDS</u> Understands that a parent has moved away, but doesn't understand why.</p> <p><u>POSSIBLE CHILD REACTIONS</u> More crying, clinging. Problems sleeping. Regression to infant behaviors. May feel anger, may not understand why he/she feels that way. May worry when parent is out of sight. May withdraw, bite or be irritable.</p> <p><u>STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS</u> 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 child time with another responsive adult (grandparent, close friend).</p>		

Table 1., continued

PRETEENS AND ADOLESCENTS

WHAT THE CHILD UNDERSTANDS

Understands but doesn't accept the divorce.

POSSIBLE CHILD REACTIONS

Feels angry and disillusioned.

Feels abandoned, that parent is leaving him/her not the other spouse.

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.

Tries to cut one or both parents out of her/his life.

Feels as if he/she will never be able to have a long-term relationship.

Feels like he/she must grow up too soon.

Worries about financial matters.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Continue to talk about each step.

Maintain two-way communication.

Keep routines, maintain rules.

Remind your child who "owns" the problem, and free him/her from guilt.

Continue to monitor your child's activities.

Don't involve your child in parental struggles.

Don't use your child as a replacement partner, (don't discuss adult problems with him/her).

Consider joint counseling.

What causes stress for children?

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. Who is expected to do what at home may change. 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 creates 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 after school.

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. You will see signs of their stress in many of their words and actions.

See Table 1 (pages 2 and 3) for descriptions of typical reactions and suggestions for how you can help them cope.

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, 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.

At first, children will talk about the character, not themselves. At some point, though, the emphasis generally shifts from the book to the shared experience.

Children often naturally 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.

On a trip to 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).

Feelings can also be shared 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, poster paints, finger paints, chalk and chalkboard, playdough and puppets.

TALKING

Sometimes in talking with children about sensitive issues, picking the right words is difficult for parents.

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 kids want their parents to stay together. But sometimes things feel so bad that a child wishes his/her parents would separate.

■ Sometimes things are better for a family when parents decide to separate.

■ My leaving is not connected to loving you. It is 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 parents and being a husband and 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. It 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, while others will actually show improvement following divorce.

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

Children's books on divorce

Books for preschool age children (under age 6)

Annie Stories: A Special Kind of Storytelling, Doris Brett. 1986. Publisher: Workman Publishing.

Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide to Changing Families, Laurene Krasney Brown & Marc Brown. 1986. Publisher: Little, Brown & Company.

Let's Talk About It: Divorce, Fred Rogers. 1994. Publisher: Putnam.

Talking About Divorce and Separation, Earl A. Grollman. 1975. Publisher: Beacon Press.

Books for elementary school age children (ages 6-12)

Annie Stories: A Special Kind of Storytelling, Doris Brett. 1986. Publisher: Workman Publishing.

Free to Be...A Family: A Book About All Kinds of Belongings, Marlo Thomas. 1996. Publisher: Bantam Books.

Talking About Divorce and Separation, Earl A. Grollman. 1975. Publisher: Beacon Press.

Why Are We Getting a Divorce?, Peter Mayle & Arthur Robins. 1988. Publisher: Crown.

Books for adolescents and teens

The Divorce Express, Paula Danziger. 1982. Publisher: Paperstar.

How it Feels When Parents Divorce, Jill Krementz. 1984. Publisher: Knopf.

It's Not the End of the World, Judy Blume. 1972. Publisher: Bradbury.

Places to look for help

GENERAL PARENTING INFORMATION

ParentLink, 1-800-552-8522. Provides research-based information to assist parents.

Web Connections

<http://outreach.missouri.edu/cooper/fok/>
Provides linkages to lists of books, organizations and websites for parents. These resources are provided as a service and do not constitute endorsement. They are periodically reviewed and updated.

SINGLE PARENTS

Parents Without Partners (PWP international headquarters), 401 N. 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.
<http://parentswithoutpartners.org>

Single Parent Resource Center, 31 E. 28th Street, Suite 200, New York, NY 10016-9998 (212-951-7030). Offers free referrals for childcare and legal services, as well as information about how to start a single-parent support group.
<http://singleparentresources.com>

National Organization of Single Mothers, Inc., 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). One-year individual membership: \$12.97.

<http://www.singlemothers.org>

National Congress for Fathers and Children (NCFC), P.O. Box 171675, Kansas City, MO 66117 (1-800-733-3237). 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. One-year membership: \$50.

<http://ncfc.net/ncfc>

National Fatherhood Initiative, One Bank Street, Suite 160, Gaithersburg, MD 20878 (1-800-790-3237). Offers a quarterly newsletter and a catalog of books and videos focusing on fatherhood issues. One-year membership: \$35.

<http://www.fatherhood.org>

STEPPARENTS

The Stepfamily Association of America, Inc., 650 J Street, Suite 205, Lincoln, NE 68508 (1-800-735-0329). 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. One-year membership, including magazine subscription and book: \$35.

<http://www.stepfam.org>

The Stepfamily Network, Inc., 555 Bryant Street #361, Palo Alto, CA 94301 (1-800-487-1073). Provides information on stepfamily resources and support groups. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping stepfamily members achieve harmony and

mutual respect.

<http://stepfamily.net>

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 books, audiotapes and videotapes for stepfamilies. One-year membership: \$70. (Counseling costs are extra.)

<http://www.stepfamily.org>

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