



The Effects of Divorce on Children

Most divorcing parents are very concerned about their children's reactions to their separation and divorce. They want to know, "Will my child grow up to be healthy and happy?"

Sociologists and psychologists are just beginning to provide reliable information about the effects of divorce on children. Research shows that the effects depend on the age of the child at the time of divorce. It also depends on other factors such as the child's gender and personality, the amount of conflict between parents and the support provided by friends and family.



Age of children

We know little about the effects of divorce on children younger than two or three years of age. Young children do not always suffer if a divorce occurs. However, problems may occur if a close relationship or bond between a parent and child is broken. Parents should agree on custody and childcare arrangements so the child does not grow up experiencing conflict between his or her parents.

Infants: Infants may not understand conflict, but may react to changes in parent's energy level and mood. Infants may lose their appetite or have an upset stomach and spit up more.

Preschool Children: Children from three to five years of age frequently believe they have caused their parents' divorce. For example, they might think that if they had eaten their dinner or done their chores when told to do so, Daddy wouldn't have gone away.

Preschoolers may fear being left alone or abandoned altogether. They may show baby-like behavior, such as wanting their security blanket or old toys. They may deny that anything has changed, or they may become uncooperative, depressed, or angry. Although they want the security of being near an adult, they may act disobedient and aggressive.

School Age Children: Some psychologists believe the adjustment to parental divorce is more difficult for elementary school children than for younger or older children. School-age children are old enough to understand that they are in pain because of their parents' separation. They are too young, however, to understand or to control their reactions to this pain.

They may experience grief, embarrassment, resentment, divided loyalty and intense anger. Their ability to become actively involved in play and activities with other children may help them cope with their family life situation.

Children this age may hope parents will get back together. Elementary aged children may feel rejected by the parent who left. They may complain of headaches or stomachaches.

Adolescents: Teens also experience anger, fear, loneliness, depression and guilt. Some feel pushed into adulthood if they must take responsibility for many new chores or care of siblings. Teens may respond to parents' low energy level and high stress level by trying to take control over the family. Others feel a loss of parental support in handling emerging sexual feelings. Teens also may doubt their own ability to get married or to stay married. Understanding the causes leading to their parents' separation, and remembering the conflict and stress of the divorce may interfere with teens' ability to cope with the changes in their family.

Gender effects

Researchers are now finding that boys raised by fathers and girls raised by mothers may do better than children raised by the parent of the opposite gender. School age boys living with their fathers or in joint custody arrangements seem to be less aggressive. They also have fewer emotional problems than those boys who live with their mothers and have little no contact with their fathers. Girls raised with mothers tend to be more responsible and mature than girls raised by their fathers.

It may be more difficult for the mother raising a young boy and the father raising a young girl. However, the children's adjustment following a divorce has more to do with the quality of the parent-child relationship than with the gender and age of the child.

Helping children adjust to divorce

Although painful, discussing the separation and divorce with your children will strengthen your relationship with them. It will also maintain their trust in you. Sharing general information is appropriate when talking with younger children. Adolescents will want more details. Be sure to let them know what the future holds for them. They will want to know what their relationship will be with both parents.

The most important factor for children's well being seems to be limiting the amount and intensity of conflict between parents. Minimizing the conflict and hostility between parents following the divorce can contribute to the child's growth. Agreement between the parents on discipline and child rearing, as well as love and approval from both parents, contributes to the child's sense of well being and self-worth.

Although joint custody has many benefits, recent research suggests there may be drawbacks to this arrangement. Preschool children may think they are being punished when they are moved from one household to another. They feel that they are sent away because they are naughty.

Older children may dislike this type of arrangement if it intrudes on their daily lives. Some parents in joint custody arrangements fight with each other because they are in constant contact. Their children suffer as a result. Successful joint custody requires close communication and cooperation that may be difficult for parents who don't get along.

Day-to-day involvement of both parents in their children's lives is the clearest way of letting children know they are loved and valued. A parent who lives in a different town or state can still keep in close touch with his or her children. Letters, e-mails, phone calls, tape-recorded messages and sharing paperwork and artwork done in school are ways parents and children can keep in contact.

Children of all ages fantasize that their parents will get together again. This may be particularly true when parents have joint custody. Be clear with the children about the finality of the divorce, and discourage their attempts to get you back together.

If possible, limit the number of disruptions children must handle during separation and divorce. For example, try to keep the child in the same school, childcare facility, home or neighborhood. Talk to children about your concerns related to the divorce. This will help them understand what is happening.

Develop positive ways to handle your own stress. Exercise, eat nutritious food, spend time with friends or take up a hobby. If you feel you are under too much stress and may hurt your children, do something quickly. Close your eyes and count to ten. Take a walk. Take a cold shower or hot bath. Look through a magazine. Call a friend or relative and ask for help.

Turn to relatives and friends for support. Don't rely on your children to meet your needs for companionship and affection. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children.

Be sure to let your children see the positive ways you use to cope with stress. This helps them understand that they must also find positive methods to handle their feelings. Suggest activities they might do to feel better. Playing with friends, joining a club, taking up a hobby, or reading can be helpful in reducing stress. Perhaps there are some activities, such as going for walks, that you and your child can do together.

Practice a kind, but firm, style of discipline. Accept children's feelings of anger. Help them find acceptable ways of expressing this anger without hurting themselves, other people, animals, or property. Provide the nurturing and love that your children need, while setting firm limits on aggressiveness and other inappropriate behavior.



Adult friends and family members can provide emotional warmth, reassurance and comfort to your children. They can teach them new skills and activities and act as role models. They can also let children know that they are important and valued.

Counseling with social workers, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, or psychiatrists can help some children. Many schools and religious organizations also provide support group sessions. In these situations children can explore their feelings and learn how other children from divorced families cope.

It often takes two or more years for children to adjust to their parents' divorce. Through love, understanding and keeping in close contact with your children, you will help them grow into well-adjusted and productive adults.

Source:

Hughes, R. & Scherer, J. Parenting on your own. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Cooperative Extension.

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