

# The Effects Of Divorce On Children

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When parents decide to divorce or separate, their child or children are faced with multiple stressors. Just knowing that things are going to be different after a divorce, but not knowing exactly how can be frightening for most children. Children from divorced families have to learn to cope with the many changes in their family. The amount of contact with one parent, often their father, will be reduced. Children may have to move from their family home or change schools. They may have a decreased standard of living. They may have to live in two homes. They may have more responsibility placed on them. The custodial parent may be physically and psychologically less available for children due to increased demands. Often, children initially focus on these immediate negative effects of the family breaking up, and do not find comfort in knowing that other families that have divorced eventually do okay.

Adjustment to divorce can take up to two years or even longer. Many children will adjust to their parents' divorce, but some will continue to have significant problems into adulthood. Parents' sensitivity to their child's needs is one of the most important factors in facilitating adjustment. Other factors such as the child's age, gender and temperament will also influence how well the child adjusts.

A preschooler's reaction to and ability to understand their parents' divorce will be very different from that of an adolescent. A child's beliefs about divorce will change over time due to their cognitive maturity and evolving relationships with their parents. Awareness and sensitivity to the developmental differences in children's reaction to divorce can provide parents with insight in how to talk to their children to help in their adjustment.

Because of their limited cognitive abilities, preschoolers are often baffled by their parents' divorce. They lack the coping skills necessary to deal with all the changes associated with divorce, which place them at risk of having more adjustment problems than an older child. Children tend to be egocentric at this age, and will often blame themselves for the divorce. They may feel that it is their responsibility to bring their parents back together. Preschoolers tend to be "emotionally needy," have fears related to abandonment, and may display acting-out behaviors following their parents' divorce or separation. Preschoolers are likely to become very distressed during visit exchanges.

Although children between the ages of about 6 to 8 continue to have fantasies about reconciling their parents, they are less likely to blame themselves for the divorce. Children at this age have been found to experience intense grief over the loss of not having one of their parents living with them. The older child (ages 9 to 12) is better able to understand their parents' divorce. They are likely to consciously express their disapproval and tend to take the side of one

of their parents. Anger at their parents is conscious.

Adolescents' ability to understand and conceptualize their parents' divorce will enhance their adjustment. However, they are faced with the task of integrating the divorce experience with their own developing identities.

Boys and girls tend to react differently to their parents' divorce. As a rule, girls tend to become anxious and withdrawn, while boys tend to become more aggressive and disobedient. Girls from divorced families may become sexually active earlier than girls from intact families. Interestingly, boys often adjust better when their mothers remarry, while girls have more difficulty.

Children of divorced families tend to have long-term adjustment difficulties when there is ongoing conflict between their parents. Boys, in particular, are likely to display marked behavior problems when this exists. Children's adjustment is also determined by the amount of conflict the parents had before the divorce.

Researchers have found that children in divorced families, where there is little conflict following the divorce, do not differ in adjustment than children from low conflict intact families.

A child's relationship with his or her parents following a divorce is critical to the child's adjustment. Although the distress of not being with both parents is one of the most painful parts of divorce, it is the continuing relationship that children have with their parents that is essential to their long-term adjustment. This highlights the importance of not criticizing the other parent in front of the child.

Children from divorced families do best when visits from the non-custodial parent are regular, predictable, and occur in a "conflict-free" setting. The quality of the relationship is more important than the quantity. If frequent contact occurs in undesirable circumstances, the child is likely to have adjustment problems. A child's adjustment is facilitated if the custodial parent is warm, understanding, nurturing, and demonstrates good parenting skills.

If the child's parents have difficulty coping with stress, the child's adjustment will be at risk, especially if the child has a 'difficult' temperament. A child with such a temperament will have significant problems coping when faced with disruptions in routine and when their parents experience increased stress and demands. These children may become more difficult to manage after the divorce. A child's adjustment to divorce will be quicker when fewer disruptions are caused by the divorce and when an established routine is achieved.

Unfortunately, a practical change that often happens with divorce is a reduce in standard of living. This may cause the custodial parent to be overwhelmed, and unable to meet the needs of the child.

In summary, in thinking about the effects of divorce on children it is important to consider factors that facilitate the child's adjustment or makes them vulnerable to the negative effects

of divorce. Some things that you can do to enhance a child's adjustment are the following

- (1) Prior to the separation, it may be helpful for both parents to discuss the impending divorce at a level appropriate for the child;
- (2) Be available to answer questions;
- (3) Read age appropriate books on divorce with your child;
- (4) Reassure the child divorce is not his or her fault;
- (5) Let the child know that you will both continue to love him;
- (6) Put child's needs first;
- (7) Do not argue with other parent in front of child;
- (8) Do not expect your child to meet your emotional needs;
- (9) Be consistent in your parenting;
- (10) Make visitations regular and predictable;
- (11) Let the child know that you will tell other important people in case he or she would like to seek support from these people
- (12) Do not be openly critical of other parent;
- (13) Do not interrogate child about visits with other parent, and (1 3) most importantly be sensitive to your child's emotional needs.

For further reading, please refer to:

Divorce: Helping your Child Adjust, C. Schroeder and B. Gordon

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