

ADJUSTING TO DIVORCE

Divorce will not have the same effect on all children. The consequences vary, depending on children's ages, family characteristics, level of family conflict, parent-child relationships, socio-economic level, mental well-being of each parent, maternal employment, and amount of social support. Some divorces bring relief to families while others leave the family devastated.

When studying groups of children who have experienced the divorce of their parents, general findings demonstrate the impact of divorce. Some factors have short-lived effects while others are longer lasting.

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

Self-Concept

- Marital discord seems to depreciate self-concept more than divorce
- Children of divorce experience a lowering of self-concept

School Performance

- Academic performance for males decreases
- Tardiness, absenteeism, and truancy increases
- Achievement test scores tend to be lower
- Emotional and behavioral problems increase
- More prone to be labeled as a problem child
- Emotional problems interfere with school work
- Parents assist less with homework

Peer Relationships

- Less sociable
- Fewer close friends
- Participate in less social activities
- More prone to behave inappropriately
- Display more hostility
- Dating:
 - Females experience more difficulties
 - Premarital sex at an earlier age
- Females demonstrate more delinquent acts

Children/Youth's Needs

- Understand the divorce—why did it happen
- Deal with loss, go through the grieving process
- Deal with anger
- Deal with guilt
- Accept permanence of divorce
- Take a chance on future love

AGE EFFECTS—WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Preschoolers (2-5 years)

- Major theme: fear of abandonment
- Symptoms: sleep disturbances
- What to do: explain that custodial parent will always return

Young Childhood (5-9 years)

- Major theme: fear of being displaced and grief (If you can replace Dad, can you replace me?)

Symptoms: school difficulties; fear of being replaced; fear for well-being of absent parent

What to do: discuss fear of displacement; have contact with non-custodial parent; know that it is okay to grieve; explain that the children were not the cause of the divorce

Older Children (9-12 years)

Major theme: acting out

Symptoms: fight with parent; spying for other parent

What to do: be patient and loving; cope with your own hurt feelings; expect some physical complaints

Adolescence:

Major theme: fear of own relationship failures

Symptoms: independence; promiscuous-type behavior could increase; confusion on what is right and wrong regarding divorce

What to do: continual contact and communication; discussions on making lasting relationships; encouragement to make new relationships

(Taken from "Children and Divorce:" An Interview with Dr. Judith S. Wallerstein, Executive Director, Center for Families in Transition, Corte Madera CA," 1991 Family Information Services, Minneapolis MN. Section V P&P-13. ISBN 1042-0878)

WAYS PARENTS CAN HELP CHILDREN ADJUST TO DIVORCE

DECREASE CONFLICT: Children adjust to divorce much better if there is less conflict between the parents; such conflict is the biggest factor in poor child adjustment. Power struggles between parents are often based on custody of the children. One parent feels his/her parenting skills have been insulted when the other parent is given custody or that they have lost ground in the battle with each other. The resulting conflict can be a heavy burden for a child who loves both parents. Mature couples who care about the well-being of their children keep harsh feelings about each other separate from their parenting role. They refuse to use the children as weapons against each other. They help the children to understand that they were not the cause of the divorce and that both parents love them just as they always have. Parents might see their relationship with each other as business partners in the enterprise of raising their children, both with the best interests of their children as a top priority.

RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS: Children need a stable, loving relationship with both parents. Parent-child relationships can very often be improved from what they were before the divorce, once marital conflicts and stress are no longer distractions. Parents should realize, however,

that during the time after the separation, they may have some needs and desires opposite those of their children. The parent is trying to build a new lifestyle and maintain self-esteem as a single parent. The child, on the other hand, yearns for a reconciliation of the two parents; he/she may be filled with anger and sadness over the family disruption. It takes time for the parent and child to get back in step with each other and resume a close parent-child relationship.

The non-custodial parent is sometimes tempted to over-indulge children he/she does not see very often. Trying to be more like a friend than a parent or playing Santa has a negative effect on the parent-child relationships and often causes jealousy and disruption with the other parent's attempts at guidance and discipline. Children need stable relationships with their parents with clear and consistent discipline from both parents. Visits with parents are more successful if they include normal routines and concentrate more on love and good communication than special treats.

ECONOMIC STABILITY: A child's adjustment is positively related to his/her custodial parent's economic stability. Suddenly putting children in a low-income or poverty situation is definitely detrimental to them. Less than half of divorced mothers with custody of their children receive full child-support payments from the fathers and 28 percent receive no payments at all. It is essential for non-custodial parents who want their children to succeed in the post-divorce adjustment to see that they are economically stable. Non-custodial parents who most often provide the needed support are also the ones who see their children more frequently. These are two related indications of their concern for the welfare of his/her children.

CONSISTENT VISITATION: Children need predictable, ongoing visitation with the parent that no longer lives with them. They fare better with free and open access to both parents (unless there is a history of psycho pathology or family violence). Regular contact with parents helps children to keep a realistic view without false or exaggerated images of the parent who is absent. Many courts now award joint custody of the children. This arrangement is best when all prefer it and when both parents live within easy traveling distance of each other. Parents must agree on basic rules and discipline, and must be able to afford the expense of two households. This arrangement, however, often has to be changed when one of the parents remarries or moves away.

One of the problems with parental visitation is that the child does not know what to expect, so it is a source of worry to him/her. "Reasonable visitation, at reasonable times, subject to reasonable motive" is too vague. Children need detailed plans; they need to know where they will be on each holiday or vacation, on which days of the week, from what time to what time, who will pick them up and take them home, etc. It is also easier for them if the transition from one household to the other has some kind of buffer, like ending a visit with the father on Monday morning when they are dropped off at school, then being picked up by the mother after the school day.