

divorce matters

A child's view

Children look at the world differently than adults. Much of what they understand about divorce depends on their age. A toddler will not understand as much as a 5-year-old understands. A school-age boy will not handle his emotions the same way his teenage sister will.

Studies show that children experience the greatest impact from divorce within two or three years of its occurrence. However, research also shows that children are greatly affected by divorce throughout their youth. At each age, there are certain feelings and reactions that children will experience.

Infants

What do they understand?

- Infants do not understand anything about separation or divorce, but they do notice changes in their parents' responses to them.

How do they react?

- Infants may experience changes in their eating or sleeping patterns.
- They may have bowel problems such as diarrhea or constipation, or they may spit up more frequently.
- Infants may seem more fretful, fearful, or anxious.

How divorce impacts children

- They display a wide range of emotions.
- They express their pain and anger differently at different ages.
- They may turn their anger and pain inward and withdraw.
- They may turn their anger and pain outward and misbehave.
- They may feel responsible.
- They may fear abandonment.
- They may show symptoms of physical illness.
- They may improve their behavior thinking it could save the marriage.

What can parents do?

- Parents can try to keep a normal routine.
- They can try to remain calm in front of their baby.
- Parents can try to rest while their baby sleeps.
- They can ask family or friends for help.
- Parents can remember that even infants need contact with both of their parents.

Toddlers

What do they understand?

- Toddlers understand that one parent no longer lives at home, although they don't know why.

How do they react?

- Toddlers cry more and become clingy.
- They have problems sleeping and experience changes in their toilet habits.
- Toddlers return to baby-like behavior such as demanding to be fed by their parents.
- They often feel angry or frustrated about the situation, but cannot understand or explain their feelings.
- Toddlers may express anger by throwing temper tantrums, acting sulky, hitting, being irritable and reckless, or withdrawing.
- Toddlers may start worrying about any kind of separation and may become fearful when a parent is out of sight.

What can parents do?

- Parents can provide nurturing and reassurance.
- They can continue established routines.
- Parents can allow some baby-like behavior, but must set clear limits and consequences.
- They can keep daily stress to a minimum by allowing their toddler extra time to complete tasks.
- Parents can try to spend time alone with their child.
- They can let their child spend time with another adult such as a grandparent or family friend who is the same sex as the parent who does not live at home.

Preschoolers

What do they understand?

- Preschoolers still don't understand what separation or divorce means, but they know their parents are angry and upset, and they live apart.

How do they react?

- Preschoolers feel a sense of loss and sorrow.
- They are likely to have fantasies, both pleasant—"Daddy will come back"—and frightening—"Monsters chased me."
- Preschoolers wonder what will happen to them and fear being abandoned by their noncustodial parent.
- They often blame themselves for the separation or divorce. They think if they had behaved better, their parents would have stayed together.
- Preschoolers may feel responsible. When being punished, perhaps the child wished one parent would go away and now that parent is gone. The child may believe that the wish is what made the parent leave.
- Preschoolers often become very angry, which they show by attacking the parent they blame or by turning their anger inward and becoming depressed or withdrawn.

What can parents do?

- Parents can encourage their child to share questions and concerns about the separation or divorce.
- They can encourage their child to express feelings, including anger, through talking, physical activity, or art work.
- Parents can set aside time daily to reassure their child that both parents understand and love him or her.
- They can tell their child, repeatedly if needed, that he or she isn't responsible for the divorce.

Elementary school children

What do they understand?

- Elementary school children begin to understand what divorce means.
- They believe that their parents don't love each other and know they won't be living together any longer.

How do they react?

- Elementary school children feel deceived.
- They feel an acute sense of loss for the parent who moved away.
- Elementary school children usually hope their parents will reunite.
- They sometimes feel rejected by the absent parent.
- Elementary school children may become very depressed, showing changes in eating and sleeping habits, lack of interest in life, poor concentration, crying, irritability and withdrawal, and a sense of hopelessness.
- They may fear abandonment, but also may worry about their parents' future well-being as well as their own.
- Elementary school children may fear not being picked up on time after school by the noncustodial parent.
- They may have trouble sleeping and may show symptoms of physical illness.
- Elementary school children may become extremely angry with both parents about the divorce.
- They may direct their anger outward, as shown in misbehavior, or inward, as shown in feelings of shame and self-blame.

What can parents do?

- Parents can encourage their child to talk about the divorce with them, relatives, or family friends.
- They can be sensitive to signs of depression, fear, and troubled behavior. They should be willing to enlist professional help if needed.

- Parents can help their child feel that life will be OK and his or her world is secure.
- They should talk to other adults, not their child, about adult problems such as money issues, unresolved feelings, work stress, etc.
- Parents should make their child's teacher aware of the situation. That person can provide support and watch for signs that the child needs additional help.

Preteens and adolescents

What do they understand?

- Preteens and adolescents understand, but usually do not accept, separation or divorce.

How do they react?

- Preteens and adolescents often become very angry.
- They may feel disillusioned, betrayed, or rejected by one or both of their parents. They may lose trust in relationships in general.
- Preteens and adolescents may lose self-esteem and may worry about being loved.
- They tend to be highly moralistic and critical, and may judge their parents' decision to divorce harshly.
- Preteens and adolescents may be extremely embarrassed or disturbed by any change in their parents' sexual behavior.
- They may become more intense in the risk taking and rebellion that is normal at this age—shoplifting, using drugs, becoming sexually active, skipping school, etc.
- Preteens and adolescents may become depressed or withdrawn, or may threaten suicide.

- They may behave much better, not worse, feeling that if their behavior improves they can save their parents' marriage.
- Preteens and adolescents may find their sense of independence disrupted. They may be afraid to separate from their parents or feel a strong need to align with one parent.

What can parents do?

- Parents can give their children time to discuss their feelings. They can suggest positive ways to handle feelings. If children have difficulty talking with their parents, encourage them to confide in another trusted adult such as a relative, family friend, teacher, or guidance counselor.
- They can follow established routines as much as possible.
- Parents can continue to monitor their children's activities: where they are, what they're doing, who they're with.
- They can emphasize that although the family may be changing, children must continue to show respect for both parents, must follow house rules, must do their best in school, etc.
- Parents can resist the urge to use their children as replacements for their missing spouse. Parents must develop adult sources of support and an adult social life. They shouldn't depend on their children to fill empty places left by a separation or divorce.

References

- Wallerstein, Judith S. and Joan Berlin Kelly. 1980. *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce*. Basic Books.
- Wallerstein, Judith S. and Sandra Blakeslee. 1990. *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children A Decade After Divorce - Who Wins, Who Loses - and Why*. Ticknor & Fields, N.Y.

Additional resources from the "Divorce Matters" series available through the Extension Store, store.extension.iastate.edu:

- Talking with children (PM 1638)
- Visitation dos and don'ts (PM 1641)
- Coping with stress and change (PM 1637)
- Talking with your child's other parent (PM 1640)

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