

Divorce Matters: A Child's View

Children, Preteens, Adolescents

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

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.

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.

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.



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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.



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