

What Parents Can Do to Help Children Adjust to Divorce

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If you are divorced or in the process of getting a divorce, you may be concerned about the effects it may have on your child or children. In light of current research, the differences between the children in divorced and intact families are generally less than previously reported. Children who experience divorce, compared with children in continuously intact two-parent families, are at only a somewhat greater risk for symptoms of poor psychological adjustment, behavioral and social problems, low self-esteem, and poor performance in school.

Children's Adjustment

Divorce and events related to divorce, including marital conflict and separation, are almost always very stressful events in the life of a child. In the months after the separation, most children will show signs of one or more of the following: anxiety, sadness, anger, aggression, uncooperative behavior, not sleeping well, and disrupted concentration at school. The length of this initial period of distress varies from child to child. For most children, the distress is short-term, and they learn to adapt with reasonable success.

Further, children's reactions to divorce will vary; an affected child's psychological well-being can range from poorer to better than it was before the divorce. Children's adjustment to divorce is affected by the amount and kind of involvement of the noncustodial parent, the custodial parent's adjustment to divorce and his or her parenting skills, conflict between parents before and after the divorce, economic hardship, and other life stresses such as moving, changing schools, and parental remarriage.

The change in the family structure will put the child at risk for these problems, as well. Children become used to a family running a certain way, so when the family structure changes (i.e. dad moves out), it could throw the child off in other areas, such as school and friends. Children need consistency, so when life becomes unpredictable, their general level of functioning can be affected.

Although many children adjust well to divorce and do not require therapeutic intervention, some will have significant adjustment problems and will need counseling. Conflict between parents after divorce (characterized by verbal and physical aggression, open hostility, and distrust) and a high level of custodial parent emotional distress place children at high risk for poor emotional and behavioral adjustment.

What Parents Can Do

Whatever the family structure, children will still need a loving, nurturing, stable, economically secure environment for their optimal growth and development. The following are ways parents can provide this environment.

Decrease Conflict

Because conflict between parents after divorce makes adjustment more difficult for children, work on ways to decrease conflict and keep children out of it. Children need custody and access arrangements that minimize the potential for ongoing conflict between parents.

Don't put children in the middle. Children should not be included in discussions of divorce issues unless it directly affects them. Don't put down the other parent. The

child generally cares for both parents, and hearing negatives about the other parent is stressful. Don't put children in situations where they have to choose between parents.

Provide a Good Relationship

A good parent–child relationship is the best predictor of good outcomes in children. If you are the parent who has moved out, make sure to stay in consistent contact with your children. You do not always have to plan fun activities when you are with your children—just spending time with them can be enough. Listen to how their day has been, and ask them questions about school and friends. Keep on top of their lives, just as you would have been if you were still living in the home.

Provide Stability

Providing routines and consistency for children helps them feel more secure. If they have to go through a lot of changes, such as a new home or school, try to establish new routines quickly.

Be Loving

Let your children know that you love them. Their reactions to divorce may lead to changes in behavior or misbehavior. They need to know that you still love them, even though you may not approve of their behavior. Preschoolers may blame themselves for the divorce. For example, they may think, “Daddy left because I was bad.” Because preschoolers are too young to understand divorce, they are confused and may become fearful. They may also regress to earlier stages of behavior. Children of elementary school age often become sad and depressed. Older children in this age group may feel a great deal of anger toward one, or

sometimes both, parents. Adolescents may feel anger towards parents and question their own ability to maintain a long-term relationship with a partner.

Take Time to Talk

Children need to know that their feelings and concerns are taken seriously. Parents need to let children express how they are feeling and what is going on in their thoughts. Listen without cutting them off with statements like, “Don't feel sad,” or, “You shouldn't be mad.” Acknowledge their feelings and discuss appropriate ways to deal with them.

While divorce is not a pleasant experience for anyone, parents can do a lot to reduce the negative effects it may have on children. When you have children, you have to put them first, before any of your own feelings. By putting them first, you are giving your children a better chance at coping with the divorce. If parents reduce conflict, work on their relationships, and minimize stressful experiences, the children can have happy, healthy lives.

Resources

- Children and Divorce. (1994). *The Future of Children*, 4.
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- Moxnes, K. (2003). Risk factors in divorce: Perceptions by the children involved. *Childhood*, 10, 131–146.
- Taylor, R. J. (2001). Listening to the children: Children of divorce speak out about their parents. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 35, 147–153.

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