

## **Helping Children Deal With Divorce**

Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*, May 4<sup>th</sup> 2008

More than 1 million children each year experience their parents' divorce. For these children, this process can be emotionally traumatic from the beginning of parental disagreement and rancor, through the divorce, and often for many years thereafter.

While divorce and separation may be solutions to a discordant marriage, for many parents the tensions continue for months and years beyond. Therefore, for many children the entire divorce process is a long, searing experience. Age-appropriate explanation and counseling is important so children can realize that they are not the cause of, and cannot be the cure for, the divorce.

The divorce itself is usually not the first major change in the affected child's life. Parental conflict before the separation is seldom hidden from children, and often leads to behavior problems, even in young children. Parents, suffering their own emotional turmoil, often fail to recognize let alone appropriately deal with or seek help for these behaviors.

The eventual divorce means the termination of the family unit, and thus is often characterized by painful losses. Approximately half of all children do not see their fathers after divorce, and relatively few have spent a night in their fathers' home in the past month.

Other losses for the child or adolescent may include changes in the home, extended family, school, playmates, financial status, health insurance coverage, and parental work schedules. Children's sense of loss is ongoing, and may increase on holidays, birthdays, and special school events.

The news of divorce in a family can be just as significant to the long-term health of a child as being diagnosed, for instance, with asthma. Young children often show irritability, increased crying, fearfulness, separation anxiety, sleep and intestinal problems, and possibly even aggression.

School-aged children often blame themselves for the breakup and parental unhappiness. They may act out more often, or become more clingy, moody, distant, quick-tempered, angry, or aggressive. School performance may decrease, and school avoidance behaviors or physical symptoms may appear.

School-aged children may also feel rejected or deceived by the absent parent. They may develop fears of abandonment, and have more nightmares and fantasies. Or they may agonize about their divided loyalties, and feel that they should be punished.

Anger and confusion over parental divorce in adolescents may lead to decreased self-esteem, relationship problems, substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behavior, depression, or delinquent behavior. At all ages, children may try to play one parent against the other, and test the new rules and limits. Some children and adolescents feel such guilt and responsibility for the separation that they try to restore the marriage.

Children can be protected to some extent from these negative and uncomfortable reactions if parents avoid some common mistakes. Foremost is to keep any hostility or aggression, verbal or physical, away from the children. Even "behind closed doors" arguments upset children. Watching parents fight is traumatic.

Parents must never criticize or “badmouth” the other parent. Most children love both parents, and want to continue doing so. Children who have to listen to one parent put down the other are no longer free to talk about their true feelings. Verbal attacks by one parent on the other assaults the child’s feelings of self-worth.

Under most circumstances, contact or visits with the other parent must not be restricted. This deprives the child of necessary parenting experiences.

Children must not be used as messengers. This just puts children in the middle of parental struggles, a painful place to be. Children must also not be used as spies. Asking children to tell tales puts them in a loyalty bind, and is a potent source of emotional distress. Likewise, children must never be asked to keep a secret, for this compromises communication with the parent to whom they are returning.

Call the child a few days after you have brought them back to the other parent. Talk with them about how much fun you had, and what you did when they were with you. Ask them what they want to do when they come see you next. End the conversation by telling them how much you look forward to seeing them. And always remind them that you love them.

For much more useful information on helping children deal with separation and divorce, contact a child mental health professional or your child’s pediatrician.