Divorce:
Its Impact on Children and How Parents Can Make Things Easier

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Divorce in America affects children of every ethnic background, religion, and level of family income. Approximately 50 percent of all first marriages will end in divorce, with over 1 million children being affected each year. If the number of marriages that end in long-term separation but not divorce is considered, the number of children being affected by parental separation is even higher.

Divorce has become a common part of the fabric of American life, and its impact on children has been studied extensively. This handout aims to help parents who are separating or divorcing to understand how this affects their children, and how they are affected differently at different ages. It also aims to guide parents in easing the impact of separation or divorce on children.

Concerns Across All Ages of Childhood

The fact that a child experiences the divorce of his or her parents does not in and of itself doom the child to significant adjustment problems. A number of parental choices and behaviors are crucial to the healthy emotional adjustment of children.

First and foremost, parents **must refrain from exhibiting their conflict in front of their children.** When children of any age are regularly subjected to the hostility that frequently accompanies the circumstances of divorce, they are exposed to **high levels of stress** that can lead to physiologic reactions, such as increases in cortisol levels. Increased cortisol is associated with **anxiety, sleep problems, weight and appetite changes, and irritability**.

Additionally, children exposed to high-conflict parental interactions are significantly more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, emotional difficulties, and decreased academic performance.

Finally, **refrain from negatively portraying the other parent.** Children who regularly hear negative comments from one parent about the other may suffer disruptions in parental attachment, and perceive pressure to declare loyalty to one parent or another, or both.

Infants

Infants are obviously not able to understand the concept of divorce, but they are able to notice changes in their environment, including changes in their caregivers' moods and in caregiver routines. Infants need stability in their daily routine, and sufficient contact with a primary caregiver to allow for the development of secure attachments.

Infants exposed to parental stress may themselves show signs of distress, including **fussiness and irritability, feeding difficulties, withdrawal or listlessness**. Infants depend on routine, physical affection, and positive social interactions in order to thrive.

Toddlers

Toddlers will be aware of changes in parental presence and may develop **separation anxiety, increased irritability and aggression, and regression of skills**. For example, a child who had given up thumb sucking may resume the habit, or a child who was recently toilet trained may begin to have accidents, or refuse to use the toilet. Sleep and eating patterns may be affected, and toddlers may develop excessive fears. Like infants, toddlers thrive on routine, and quality stress-free time with their parents.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers are better able to understand that one parent is no longer living with them. However, they likely will not understand the permanency of divorce, and will **ask repeated questions**. Repeated questions by preschoolers are not an indication of lack of understanding, or memory, but are a developmentally appropriate method of confirming the stability of what they have been told. These repetitive questions help in the processing of information.

Preschoolers may exhibit **more demanding behaviors**, or attempt to control their surroundings in an effort to create order. More **clinginess** is often noted, as is more verbalized **fears of abandonment**. **Developmental regression**, especially in the realm of speech, is not uncommon during parental separation, which is a traumatic event to them. Some preschoolers focus on **reunion fantasies**, others develop a host of **imaginary friends** and are seen role-playing their parents' situation with them. **Nightmares** become more common.

Parents can protect preschoolers and ease the adjustment period by providing one-on-one attention, keeping behavioral expectations constant (AND consistent between the two homes!), and providing honest and developmentally appropriate information about how the divorce process will affect their preschooler's day-to-day life.

School-Aged Children

School-age children experience tremendous cognitive growth and become better able to comprehend the concept and permanency of divorce. School-age children are **prone to blaming themselves** for the dissolution of their parent's marriages, and **reunion fantasies** continue to be common. Changes in mood are also common, especially **increased sadness and anger**. Difficulty with academic performance is common. School-aged children are more likely to **act out**, out of character, possibly to test behavioral boundaries in their new situation.

School-aged children need reminders that divorce is final, and that they are at fault. Again, behavioral expectations and consequences for rule violations must be consistent at BOTH homes. Often, the non-custodial parent refuses to play the heavy, both for fear of affecting the child's attachment and sometimes for to undermine the other parent's authority. Both parents share EQUAL responsibility for parenting even if the time the child spends with each parent is unequal. Separation or divorce does NOT permit one parent to relinquish his or her responsibilities to guide the child's behavior down the right path.

School-aged children also need to be supported in maintaining relationships with both parents, and will benefit from being allowed to express their feelings openly. As it was before the divorce, children after a

divorce should continue to be shielded from negative portrayals of the other parent, and from fighting between the ex-spouses.

Adolescents

Teens are better able to understand abstract and complex issues surrounding divorce, yet they often have difficulty accepting divorce, and **may self-blame**. Signs that adolescents are having difficulty adjusting to divorce include acting out, taking on excessive responsibility, and worrying about adult issues.

Adolescents with divorcing or divorced parents are more likely to have both **externalizing problems** (e.g. drug and alcohol use, rule violations at home and at school, inappropriate sexual behaviors), and **internalizing problems** (e.g. depression, anxiety, withdrawal from family or friends) than are their counterparts who have intact families of origin. Adolescents are in the process of finding their own identity, and their feelings about their parents' divorce may affect their own views on love and relationships.

Adolescent boys are more likely to **struggle academically** in the face of parental divorce then are adolescent girls, and though girls are more likely to have emotional disturbances at first, they are more quick to emotionally adjust than are boys.

Parents can ease the adolescent's adjustment to divorce by being open to calm conversation about their teenager's reaction to the divorce, by not including their adolescent children in conversation about adult topics (e.g. financial or legal matters), and by having consistent expectations for their behavior. Teens with significant emotional and behavioral concerns also may benefit from group or individual therapy.

Adjustment to Blended Families

Approximately one-half of divorced adults remarry within 4 years of their divorce, and at least one-third of American children enter stepfamilies. Divorce and remarriage are not acute events; rather they entail extended periods of adjustment. Parents may be in a series of committed relationships, and each relationship may or may not involve remarriage or cohabitation. Clearly, some children of divorce must cope with a continually evolving family structure.

Although each situation and child must be considered individually, parents should be encouraged to give the timing and method of introduction to a new partner serious thought. Adjustment to a new relationship may be smoothed if children are allowed adequate time to adjust first to the parents' separation or divorce. The introduction of a new partner (and his or her children) should be done slowly and with sensitivity to the child's reactions.

In general, young children and older adolescents cope fairly well with a parent's remarriage, whereas early adolescents struggle more with the addition of a stepparent. Children of any age who have spent lengthy periods of time in divorced, single-parent households tend to have more difficulty accepting a parent's new relationship. Girls are more likely than boys to oppose a stepparent and less likely than boys to benefit from the presence of a stepfather.

Taking Care of Yourself

Perhaps the most important determinant in a child's successful transition through a separation or divorce is the parents' mental health. Parenting ability often declines before and during the divorce process (a phenomenon known as "diminished capacity to parent") due to stress, and perhaps depression. When parents are able to maintain emotional stability after divorce, their children will fare better as well. Bottom line: parents should seek counseling during and after a divorce, not only in their own best interest, but in the interest of their children.

Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce

In general, most children's adjustment difficulties are thought to resolve within 2 to 3 years after a divorce, and 3 to 5 years after a remarriage. However, in some cases, adjustment difficulties may fade, and then return later in life. Bottom line: take things slow, treat a child's reaction and adjustment to divorce much like grieving (which is not a race), and expect feelings to surface later that need to be addressed openly and without judgment.

Final Tips:

- Divorce does not have to lead to poor adjustment in children
- The best way to increase the likelihood of positive adjustment is to avoid exposing the child to parental conflict, or to parent hostility to the other parent.
- Cooperative co-parenting is crucial, as is consistency in behavioral expectations and rule violation consequences.
- Loosening the rules and indulging the child's material wishes may help the child's mood in the short-term, but will cause difficulties when the parent attempts to return to previous limits and expectations, and will cause difficulties for the other parent who is not similarly loosening and indulging.
- Lengthy and adversarial litigation regarding custody or support issues is associated with less involvement of one parent, and with poorer child adjustment.
- Good parental self-care, making sure that any mental health issues are being addressed, is also crucial to the child's short- and long-term well-being.
- Children of all ages must be listened to and have their feelings validated. Parents may need to make decisions that the children do not like, but the fact that the parents listen to their viewpoint will help their children adjust to these decisions.
- Children going through the divorce of parents are already dealing with many changes. Therefore, it is important to retain as much consistency in parenting techniques as possible as a way to promote stability and predictability.
- Relatives should avoid "taking sides" in front of the children
- The child's school should be approached about an ongoing separation or divorce so that staff can understand any behavioral or emotional changes in the child, and thus be prepared to provide quick and effective support and intervention.

Thanks for reading.