

## Keeping Children Out of the Middle

### What are the short- and long-term effects of divorce?

Should an unhappy marriage be ended? If there is abuse toward either spouse or the children, or if there are frequent fights or much tension in the household, a divorce might be better for all parties.

However, divorce can have significant effects on children. Parents should consider their decision and should make every effort to minimize the stress on the children, who are often the last to know that their parents are separating, and sometimes do not even get to say good-bye to the parent who moves out.

Although many children gradually accept the situation and eventually recover their equilibrium, parents should be aware of short- and long-term repercussions felt by most children of divorce.

### What are the early effects of divorce on children?

The impact of separation or divorce varies, and can be tempered to some degree by the support of other adults who can provide stability in the child's life. When a marriage has been full of verbal or even physical battles, a child's response to separation may initially be a sense of relief. Even then, there are many other complex reactions. Children often feel responsible for parental problems – and may, at times, have actually been a source of parental disagreement. And when a child sees that parents can stop loving each other, it is not hard for them to imagine that parents will stop loving them, as well.

Generally, the short-term effects of divorce on children are numerous and quite evident, and will depend in part on the child's age, personality, and maturity. Many are signs of psychological dysregulation, showing up in a variety of ways:

- sadness, and even suicidal thoughts or behavior
- feelings of abandonment
- apathy and withdrawal from family, friends, and/or activities
- anger (at self and others), rage or even violent behavior
- impulsivity, acting out, defiance, and limit-testing behavior
- self-blame or guilt; feeling responsible for parental problems
- neglect of schoolwork and drop in grades
- drug or alcohol use, or other self-destructive behavior
- sexual activity

Children may be on their best (or worst) behavior if they feel that they are responsible for the divorce, if they are seeking attention, or if they think acting like the "perfect" child will get parents back together. If a parent gets involved with another partner soon after the separation (or if that was a factor in the break-up), children usually have difficulty getting along with that parent, and give the new partner a very hard time. They may also be unfriendly to anyone dating either parent.

### What can parents do to help their children during and following a divorce?

Most parents want the best for their kids and even in the midst of their own pain, they try to help the children get through the transition. However, some parents are so angry at their spouse, or so emotionally needy themselves, that they may put their own needs ahead of those of their children, causing even more stress and potential long-term damage than the divorce itself. Here are some suggestions for parents:

## **DO NOT**

- argue in front of your children
- bad-mouth or belittle the other parent
- force children to choose sides
- blame children for the divorce
- make children into adult confidants, or require them to take on responsibilities beyond age-appropriate expectations
- manipulate or put children in the middle of adult conversations – if you and your ex cannot talk civilly to each other, go through your lawyers or other adults rather than using the children as intermediaries
- make promises to children that you cannot keep
- try to “buy” a child’s love or pay off your own guilt with gifts, money, or trips
- abdicate your role as parent by letting children run wild, stay up late all the time, or become overly disrespectful

## **DO**

- remember that even though you are no longer husband and wife, you are still both parents – always keep the best interests of the children in the forefront
- tell the children together about the divorce, if at all possible
- reassure them they are loved, that they are not to blame, and that they are not responsible for fixing their parents’ problems
- develop a parenting plan that allows both parents reasonable access to the children
- stay involved with children on a regular basis – they need both parents in their lives
- keep your promises – if you are say you will pick them up at a particular time or take them somewhere specific, then do so
- be reasonable and flexible about holidays, vacations, and other occasions, remembering that the child’s needs come first
- provide structure and reasonable rules that assure a sense of security
- invite conversation about your child’s feelings – be a good, non-defensive listener even if it’s hard for you to hear, and accept and acknowledge your child’s feelings, whatever they are
- be helpful and supportive, even if that means you have to put your own feelings aside – for example, by offering to call the other parent for a young child, or by listening to good things that happened while visiting the other parent, without negative reactions
- find supportive services for your children – they may need productive activities, classes, sports, counseling, and other adults in their lives while they are adjusting to their new family situation
- get help for yourself – you may need therapy to help you deal with your own feelings and stresses, and you will be helping your children at the same time, by not burdening them with your adult problems

### **If you suspect abuse:**

- let your attorney know about the suspected abuse
- report the abuser to your local Child Protective Services
- keep careful documentation of all complaints from your child
- take pictures of bruises or other injuries
- do everything you legally can to protect your child
- NEVER make a false accusation of abuse to gain custody – long term damage to the child, the other parent, and your own custody rights may result.

### **What are warning signs of divorce-related depression?**

While it is natural for children to be upset when their parents are divorcing, be aware of indications that your child may be depressed. A child's distress is most commonly seen either in acting out behaviors or in guarded, withdrawn behaviors. Some signs that might indicate depression in a child are:

- **Loss of spontaneity** Children are normally playful, but stress may cause a child to become morose and moody. This is usually one of the first indicators that a child is depressed.
- **Excessive brooding** It is common for children to experience some withdrawal and moodiness, but if the child seems unable to bounce back and remains gloomy, professional assistance is needed.
- **Irrational fears and/or clinginess** Some children react to divorce by becoming fearful of many other unrelated things, while others become infantile and clingy. If reassurances and patience do not alleviate concerns, professional help may be needed.
- **Anger and acting out behavior** One way that children express depression is by behaving in ways that either push others away, or draw attention to their plight. A child who is getting in trouble in class, getting into fights, yelling at parents or pushing siblings may be demonstrating depressive symptoms. Seek counseling rather than simply punishing misbehavior.
- **Loss of interest in favorite activities** When children have lost their playfulness, they may also lose interest in clubs, sports, crafts, or other activities in which they had been involved prior to the divorce. If this withdrawal does not reverse, it may be an indication of ongoing depression.
- **Sleep problems** One sign of depression is seen in either an increase or a decrease in former sleep patterns. Sleep problems can include unwillingness to go to bed, difficulty getting to sleep, nightmares, return to bedwetting, or not wanting to get up and go to school.
- **Eating problems** When depressed, some people cannot eat, while others tend to seek solace in food and overeat, binge, or eat compulsively. Eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia can develop as a result. If you suspect an eating problem that lasts more than a few weeks, you need professional intervention.
- **Dramatic drop in grades** Sometimes children are able to find a sense of structure in their newly chaotic lives by focusing on school. But if concentration is affected for an extended period, and if homework is forgotten or not completed, grades will suffer.

- **Drug or alcohol use, self-injury or sexual promiscuity** Adults often use substances to numb their pain, so it should not be surprising that children may also seek pain relief in drugs or alcohol. Young people also are more frequently turning to injuring themselves to express their pain, or finding solace in sexual behaviors. These youngsters need professional intervention and parents should take immediate action to prevent further damage or possible addictions.

## What are the long-term traumatic effects of divorce on children?

New research suggests that the effects of divorce can be long-lived and traumatic in nature. Trauma is defined as a person's reaction to or experience of a situation, rather than the situation itself.

The human body is wired for survival. When we feel threatened or endangered, the sympathetic nervous system ignites a set of physiological and neurological mechanisms. This reaction is often called the fight or flight response. But when neither fighting nor running away is possible in a stress situation, a third reaction – freeze – may occur. This reaction is the basis of traumatic stress. Adults often do not realize the depth of reaction children have to events in their lives – even falling off a bike or being hospitalized can be traumatizing to a child – and the effects of a stressful family environment in a divorce is even more so.

Trauma is now recognized as a precursor to clinical depression. Depression in children often appears differently than in adults, and frequently presents as acting out behavior. In many cases, difficulties do not become apparent until many years later.

Some common and potentially traumatic effects of divorce on children are:

- depression
- grief
- anger, rage, or violent behavior
- behavior problems at school
- delinquent-like behavior
- running away from home
- precocious sexuality (particularly for girls, who may have felt rejected when a father left)
- despair and a sense of helplessness and hopelessness
- erosion of self-esteem
- difficulty establishing or maintaining healthy adult relationships
- delayed marriage, divorce, or unconventional lifestyle

Parents who recognize the significance of the event of divorce can help their children confront their feelings about the event over time. Children surrounded by support, open communication and plenty of information experience fewer harmful effects from a divorce or separation.

## What about custodial arrangements and co-parenting?

One of the most critical issues in divorce regards the custody of children. While the final determination is usually made by the court, input from both parents and sometimes from children is taken into account. The primary consideration is what is in the child's best interests. There are several custody possibilities:

- sole custody by one parent (the other almost always has responsibilities for some financial support)
- joint legal custody (both parents share in legal decisions, but the child lives with one parent and has visitation with the other)
- joint physical and legal custody (legal decisions as well as physical custody are shared – this is more common when parents will live within reasonable distance of each other)
- in relatively rare circumstances, neither parent has custody and the children have legal guardians, either a relative or someone else appointed by the court

Creative arrangements are sometimes incorporated, for example, where the children stay in the same house and the parents take turns living there on a regular schedule. Any kind of custodial situation needs to hold the child's needs as primary – parents must find a way to put aside their own feelings about the divorce to provide a safe and secure environment for children.

**Co-parenting** can be a part of any custodial arrangement. Co-parenting involves divorced or separated parents who are sensitive to their child's distress and who find ways to avoid putting the children in the middle of their disputes.

Children's should always come first, despite bad feelings between divorcing parents. Both parents should remember that their kids did not create their own lives, nor did they choose for their family to split up. Parents would probably not be divorcing if they were getting along well and managing their differences in productive ways. But parental conflicts need to be handled without further stressing children. Some areas of contention might be:

- finances and support issues
- visitation or childcare schedules
- attending or participating in school events
- parenting styles and discipline
- decisions about medical and dental treatment
- decisions about vacations and schools
- rules for teenagers, including parties, driving, dating, curfew, etc.
- dealing with new relationships, possible remarriage, blended families, and half- or step-siblings

It is unfair and unwise to discuss contentious divorce issues with your children, or to badmouth the other parent, as this creates additional stress for children. Maintaining positive relationships will avoid making a child choose loyalties and live with secrets to protect parents from each other.

Above all else, it is important to remember to be a parent, which means acting like an adult and putting your child first, despite the hard feelings which might exist between you and your spouse. Protecting and loving your children during tough times will help build trust, improve adjustments to the new situation, and avoid long-term negative impact of divorce.

## Online resources about children and divorce

### General Information

[Helping Your Child Through a Divorce](#) – from Kids Health, includes information on how to tell a child, different reactions according to child's age, adjusting to living arrangements, and dealing with the aftermath of divorce.

[Children and Divorce](#) – American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy outlines how to help your child during the divorce and lists some of the books and other resources available for divorcing parents and children.

[Helping Children Understand Divorce](#) – (PDF version available) from the University of Missouri, this site provides tips for talking with children about divorce and helps parents understand their children's thoughts and feelings about divorce. Includes books (including some for very young children) and other resources to help families cope with divorce issues. There are also links to two excellent articles for helping children, one addressing the needs of infants and toddlers, and the other on activities for children (art, letter writing, etc.). Also includes links to organizations providing support for parents, single moms, dads, etc.

[Co-Parenting through Separation and Divorce](#) – North Dakota State University presents clear, straightforward information about co-parenting and provides guidelines for putting children first.

### For Children and Adolescents

[Kids' Turn Central](#) is a site providing numerous links for children and parents. There are sections on art activities, books, how to talk to parents, what to do with anger, coping with parental arguments, and other similar topics to help children feel less alone and more capable of handling divorce.

[A Kid's Guide to Divorce](#) from Kids Health answers children's most common concerns and questions about divorce and offers suggestions for handling feelings.

[Dealing with Divorce](#) from Kids Health, is an article for teens that discusses ways to cope with their feelings about their parents' divorce, how to talk with parents about concerns, suggests self-care and future planning.

### Divorce as Trauma

[Principles of Working with Traumatized Children](#) – from Scholastic, this article is by Dr. Bruce Perry, an internationally recognized expert on children and trauma. Provides profile of children who experience trauma and lists guidelines for communication following a traumatic event. Discusses trauma in general, rather than the trauma of divorce specifically, but helpful nonetheless.

[Overcoming Divorce Trauma](#) This article by Kristina Diener, Psy.D. discusses the damage that can occur in a divorce and suggests ways to prevent divorce trauma. Includes both book and film suggestions for helping parents and children understand and cope with divorce.

### Additional Resources on Trauma and Divorce

Note: The following article provides more detailed information about the traumatic aspects of divorce for children.

[The Trauma of Divorce: Reducing the Impact of Separation on Children](#) – from the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress. Discusses divorce as trauma, defining the characteristics of divorce-related trauma and the effects on children. Also includes sections on attachment problems, minimizing the impact of divorce and repairing the damage caused.