

How Divorce Affects Children: Developmental Stages

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Divorce affects children. All children grow through developmental behavior changes, but children who experience divorce may exhibit more extremes in their behavior. It is not uncommon for children to experience regression to earlier stages of development or to display aggression with children, family members and care providers during this stressful time. The following ages and stages are guidelines for those who interact with children during a divorce.

Birth to Six Months

The developing fetus can feel the mother's tension. Without understanding it, the baby may react to it with agitated movements. Babies exhibit irritability and hyperactivity when parents are stressed. They may cry frequently and have sleep or digestive problems. Infants do not recognize "divorce" as the cause of distress, but they may react to the tension-charged atmosphere when they feel their security and safety is threatened.

Action: Anxious infants are more secure when held frequently and securely. A calm, soothing voice and eye contact will reassure the child that their needs are met. Quality and consistency of child care is important at this age.

Six to Twelve Months

Attachments are critical at this age. An infant can distinguish between parents and other loving care givers. Infants do not understand "divorce," but they are aware of the absence of a parent and are increasingly fearful of separation, strangers, and nightmares. Transitioning from one parent to the other may cause crabbiness and clinging to the point of being inconsolable.

Action: Quality and consistent care by loving parents and caregivers reaffirms the trust bond and teaches the child that needs will be met. Children should take familiar things with them wherever they stay. Blankets, bottles, toys, pacifiers or a favorite stuffed animal can provide immense comfort for the child in a new or stressful situation.

Eighteen Months

Children begin to build friendships. There is little language interaction, but research shows toddlers know when friends are present (for example in daycare) by increased activity. If the friend is absent, the toddler may exhibit bad moods and temper tantrums. When needs are not met, toddlers may regress to earlier stages of behavior and can experience sleep problems. They may also exhibit an increased need to cling to parents or other adults. These are signs that toddlers are trying to cope with issues beyond their understanding.

Actions: Consistent and loving attention from all those close to the toddler are essential. Some of these actions include firm guidelines for naps, bed-time rituals, meal times and play times. Extra time and patience may be needed to prepare toddlers for these daily activities when they are feeling stressed.

Pre-School

Watch out! These children are beginning to model behaviors they have learned, especially from the same sex parent. They develop a conscience and usually know right from wrong. Children of this age believe the world revolves around them; thus if the family breaks up — they feel guilty. They feel responsible for the divorce. They believe parents will remarry each other. In their hearts, the top feelings are fear and sadness. In their head, they know that one parent no longer lives with them. Parental support is extremely important and contact with the opposite sex parent is important for building sex-role identities. Peers become important for additional support at this age. They don't talk about their feelings much, but they express them through play.

Actions: Consistency in routines, affection and boundaries continues to build the child's positive feelings. Pre-schoolers internalize everything and express their feelings in a limited manner. Give them only the information they need. Expressions of love and concern are important for parents and children at this time. If the parent feels

supported, they are able to better support their child. It is good for all children in the child care center to understand the many types of families and the strengths of each family. Building Family Strengths and Positive Discipline are resources for these development issues.

Six to Eight Years

Independence is the number one goal of the early school-aged child. Friends continue to be important, but parents are the core of the child's existence. The adult/parent behaviors teach children more than their words at this age. The motto is, "Do what I do **and** do what I say." It is important to use respect when talking with children about the other parent. This modeling will help children identify feelings and express them in an appropriate way.

Action: Reinforcing rules and giving positive feedback will help children develop personal goals, limits, and self-rewards. Games and activities may help with task. Painting "worry rocks" is a way to help children express feelings and learn to respect how others feel. Choosing appropriate words is important for children this age. "I hate you!" doesn't say nearly as much as, "I feel scared when you and Dad fight." "I" messages and identifying words that hurt will help this age group. Consistency, boundaries, logical consequences and a big dose of affection are the best tools to use with these kids.

Nine to Twelve

This group begins to understand the concept of morals. They are told to do "moral" things, but when they see parents break rules it creates a conflict within children. Thus morality often becomes confusing. Who are rules for anyway? Kids experiencing divorce at this age feel deep anger and often don't even know why they are angry. They feel cheated, hurt,

guilty and just plain mad! It is not unusual to see fights at this age because the emotional trigger is on "sensitive."

Action: Provide consistency and widening boundaries along with bigger consequences for poor decision-making. Offer physical and creative activities to express pent-up emotion in appropriate ways. Sports are a great way to relieve tension. Chores give them a way to work off the aggression. Stress rules for not harming others when angry. Positive feedback is a most important reward. It comes in the form of hugs and pats on the back. Pre-pubescent girls and boys need some coaching on sexual mores. Girls living with same-sex parents often seem precocious in relationships with males. Children of this age are usually able to understand some of the problems in their parents' divorce and should be included in family decisions about visitation, family conferences, and the day-to-day working needs of the family unit. At this age all kids benefit from a significant adult in a mentor role who will make them feel special and secure.

Resources

- Bode, Janet and Mack, Stan., *For Better, For Worse-A Guide to Surviving Divorce for Preteens and Their Families*. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, New York, 2001.
- Johnston, Janet R. & Roseby, Vivienne. *In the Name of the Child-A Developmental Approach to Understanding and Helping Children of Conflicted and Violent Divorce*. The Free Press, New York. 1997.
- Nelson, Jane. *Building Family Strengths and Positive Discipline*.
- Wasserman, Selma. *The Long Distance Grandmother—How to Stay Close to Distant Grandchildren*. Harlley & Marks Publishers, Inc, Point Roberts, Washington, 2001.

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Issued October, 2002

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