

Helping Children Handle Divorce

Divorce is an all too common part of the reality for many children. During the time surrounding a divorce, it is easy for parents to be so engulfed in their own emotions that, despite their love for their children, they may overlook children's needs and even increase the trauma of the experience for them.

As painful as the experience is for adults, it is even more so for children. The coping skills of children are not as tempered as their parents' and, though their worries may seem few in comparison, they pose serious challenges to their identity, their sense of belonging, and their self-confidence.

In more adaptable children symptoms such as low self-esteem, anxiety, irritability, inability to take risks, or problems developing relationships of their own may develop. Children with more difficulty adjusting to the divorce may exhibit behavior problems, poor academic performance, phobias, alcohol/drug involvement, or other self-defeating behaviors.

How can parents minimize the impact of this life change?

Keep the child in an appropriate role. It is tempting to involve children in issues surrounding the divorce in ways that are not healthy. Before sharing information about the divorce with your child, ask yourself, "Am I sharing this information for my child's benefit, or for selfish reasons?" The age and maturity of the child will determine what information is appropriate, but parents must use caution in sharing information that may create undue emotional strife for the child or unnecessarily complicate their relationship with the other parent.

Listen. Children experience a wide range of emotions during a divorce. Be open about allowing them to discuss their feelings, without pressuring them to do so. Younger children may need more creative outlets, such as using art or games to help them express themselves. It is important for parents to remember that just because a child is quiet and continuing to do well in school does not mean they do not need emotional support.

Respect the child's right to love each parent. As much as possible, minimize situations where your child is forced to choose between his or her parents. Allow them the freedom to love and respect each parent. Any unresolved hostility, anger or bitterness between divorcing parents, when imposed on the child, only makes the child's ability to heal more difficult.

Respect your child's emotions. Children of divorce will experience some emotions that may be uncomfortable for parents to acknowledge. Feelings such as anger, confusion, betrayal, shame and guilt are a normal part of the experience. Allowing your child to have these emotions and express them appropriately may cause your own unresolved emotions to surface. It is important to allow your child the privilege of dealing with their own emotions without having the burden of the parent's emotions intermingled. If this is too difficult, professional counseling may be a valuable tool for you and your child.

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