

What Happens to Children In Early Divorce

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

There is no doubt about it: divorce hurts. Everyone involved usually experiences distress with divorce. Emotional, financial, spiritual, and physical distress are common for both divorcing parties. The children also typically experience distress, especially fear and confusion, even when they are tired of the parents fighting all the time.

For the children, it feels as though their lives have moved from security into uncertainty, with no clear path ahead. Children will have many questions about who they will live with, whether, when, and where they will spend time with the other parent, and whether they will still have access to grandparents and other significant family members. They usually know other children whose parents are divorced and have heard things about others' experiences that may cause them concern.

Parents often divorce when children are in grade school and still developmentally self-centered. They remember events where they got into trouble or when parents were in conflict over them and may believe that they were the cause of the divorce. Even if they don't think it to be their fault, they "feel divorced" too.

While children are trying to deal with their own pain, parents may draw the children into the couple's divorce drama. The classic example of pulling the children into the middle of the divorce is when either or both parents use the kids as part of the problematic power and control struggles. Examples would be to use the children as a "reason" to communicate with the other party, withhold them from the other party, use them for guilt trips, grill them for information, and run information between the two parents. It worsens when parents ask the children to "keep secrets" from the other parent.

The children are trying to sort out their feelings, and when they are put into the middle of the divorce, they find themselves in a position of responsibility for the parent's feelings. Sometimes, parents even ask kids to provide comfort and support. This places them in an adult role where they're expected to possess adult skills, which they lack. Children tend to have an inner conflict about loyalty without being drawn into a direct tug-of-war.

Parents must keep their kids out of the middle of the conflict. Children don't need either parent to tell them negative things about the other parent. They don't need to know about child support payments or their lack thereof. They need two concerned parents willing to talk about their children's feelings, answer their questions, and patiently help their children deal with the changes in their lives. It is confusing and harmful when children are asked to take sides and listen to parental arguments or criticism of the other parent. Parents should protect their children from the emotional drama between parents. It is essential not to use your children to punish your spouse by withholding them, refusing gifts for your child, or screening and controlling their phone calls to the other parent. They should not be used as a parental confidante or expected to take on adult roles in the family. It is also essential that parents do not parent out of guilt and abandon rules, roles, and standard structure. Parents should work together to maintain consistent household rules and reinforce each other's parenting actions.

Children will often regress to previous developmental stages during a trauma like divorce. Patience, understanding, and reassurance are needed. Discussions about divorce should match the child's developmental abilities and understanding. Both parents would be well-advised to tell the children repetitively that it is not their fault, that both mom and dad still love them, and that they will always be their parents.

Children may express the same fears, confusions, feelings, or worries over and over. Both parents should be patient and understanding and continue to answer the repeated questions. It is important to keep explanations simple without blaming the other parent or the children. Keep the drama to a minimum, but don't tell kids to plaster a smile on their faces. Let them

have their feelings. Let them know that whatever feelings they are having (including anger) are normal and that they are going to be okay. **Note:** This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2010 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy."



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