

How Divorce Impacts Children



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Divorce is difficult for everyone, but one legal option that could help minimize pain and suffering is called "Collaborative Settlement." This method minimizes the catastrophic effects of divorce on children by shortening the legal process to approximately four months, reducing financial burdens among parents and minimizing emotional upheaval among all the players.

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Divorce is what happens between adults, but the effect it has on children cannot be understated or minimized.

In children, divorce is equated to the death of a parent, with similar effects and stages of grief and acceptance. Even the most grounded child will experience shock and denial, sadness, anger, guilt and blame, worry and fear, confusion, hope, and then acceptance.

"The State Of Our Unions 2005" - an essay on the state of marriage in the United States - states that America has the lowest percentage of children living with their biological parents among Western industrialized nations. Divorce has become commonplace in America more so than anywhere else and it's impacting the way our children are being raised.

Additionally, recent trends show more couples choosing cohabitation over traditional forms of marriage. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the divorce rate in 2005 (per 1,000 people) was 3.6 - the lowest rate since 1970. But, the marriage rate also has dropped with a 50 percent decrease since 1970. Children in this type of family system are more at risk to the harmful effects of divorce and separation due to higher breakup rates than in married couples.

In her book "Children of Divorce: The Psychological Tasks of the Child" (American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1999), Judith Wallerstein describes divorce in three overlapping stages: Chaos, Transition and Stability.

Stage One: Chaos

The first stage is marital conflict which culminates in one parent moving out. Home life is chaotic for the children, with parents battling each other on every issue. Life as the children once understood it has drastically changed. Now, there are two homes to shuttle between, different rules, greater responsibilities, money difficulties; both parents may need to work and children may have to move out of their original home and leave friends.

At this stage, some parents use their children to deliver messages to the other parent or spy on them. In a desperate reach fueled by envy and anger, many parents criticize the other parent in front of their children in hopes of winning affection and approval.

When parents engage in these tactics, they draw their children into their adult battles and make them unwitting soldiers in their divorce wars. Many parents do not do this intentionally. Instead, they are so focused on the anger and hurt they are experiencing that they are blinded to their actions. In this state of chaos and confusion, sometimes the emotional and psychological needs of the children go unnoticed.

Stage Two: Transition

This is the stage where the parents and the children attempt to put their lives back together. At this point, some children may have moved into new homes or may still be splitting time between two homes, are making new friends and are attending new schools. This is a vulnerable time for children of divorce, with many factors still unknown and reunification still very much hoped for by the affected children.

Stage Three: Stability

In stage three, family life has become fairly stable. Visitation and child support are in place and living arrangements are settled upon. Children at this stage are still highly vulnerable to various stressors, such as financial strain, dealing with the constant adjustment of living in two homes and the introduction of new romantic partners the parents may bring into the home.

Effects of Divorce

Researchers have identified long-term effects from divorce.

Long-term effects occur when children witness frequent and intense parental conflict, experience parental abandonment and/or experience regular periods of inattention. When these factors are in play, children remain "stuck" at the beginning stage of the divorce process and are often unable to take on new developmental tasks that are part of the normal growth process.

As well, many of these children are depressed and/or angry and can have great difficulties behaviorally, emotionally, psychologically and academically. Without intervention, the future is very bleak for these children, who may drop out of school, turn to drugs or alcohol, or engage in high risk behaviors.

Children cannot prevent parents from divorcing, but with attention and consideration by the parents, they can get through the process without

becoming victims. This is achieved when parents keep conflicts and issues between each other and remain positively engaged with their children.

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Connecting with Your Children

Learning to relate to your children both verbally and behaviorally will impact whether they open up or close you out. Divorce is a troubling time for everyone, but maintaining a personal connection to your child is doable with a little forethought.

Here are some tips on how to connect and relate:

- Once parents know that they are separating, children will need simple explanations about separation and divorce to help them understand. Provide them with information on: what is happening, why and when it is happening, and what the visitation schedule will be like.
- Children need ongoing reassurance that they are loved. They may show signs of grief. Acknowledge their feelings and be empathic by letting them know you understand how difficult this is for them. Explain that what is happening is in no way their fault or their responsibility.
- Younger children may regress and act babyish for a while by talking baby-talk, wetting the bed, having temper tantrums, being very clingy or pretending to be ill. Older children might be reactive by showing agitation, increased resistance, avoidance, increased anger and lack of concentration. Avoid punishing or blaming. Be patient and supportive to help them regain self-confidence and regain balance.
- Children are able to accept separation or divorce when you take the time to explain the situation to them and continue to be lovingly attentive and firm with your expectations.
- Set down on paper a regular visitation schedule. Helping them come to terms with when and how long the visitations will be will help them develop a strong sense of security.
- Maintain contact by phone, letter, text message or e-mail if you are living out of the area and visitation is infrequent. This helps children feel connected and lets them know you still love and care about them.
- Do things together as a family. Children don't need expensive outings and special toys. They need a stable, loving family environment in both homes.

- Continue to have rules and limits as you did in the past. Children thrive much better when they fully understand the parameters that guide their lives.

Remember that children need enjoyable time with their parents, apart from the grief and heaviness of divorce or separation. Plan time together to include: engaging in conversation during dinner, doing chores together, going to the park or beach together, or by having family nights with board games or homemade ice cream sundaes. The most precious gift you can give your children is your time.

Local Support Groups

1. Children of Divorce and Single Parents
Faith Fellowship Church
Melbourne: (321) 259-7200
2. Children of Divorce Family
Counseling Center
Rockledge: (321) 632-5792
3. Divorce Care for Kids
Calvary Chapel
West Melbourne: (321) 952-9673

Impact of Divorce on Children at Different Developmental Stages

Adapted from Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Solomon, 2005. Provided by Ilene Scharf, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

Age	Characteristics	Separation Issues	Signs of Distress	Suggestions
0-8 months	Dependent on parents of meeting needs; Develop trust through consistent care giving	Continue to meet basic needs after separation; As long as needs are met, sleep environment is not critical	Sleep disturbances; Clingy; Crying	Create bonding opportunities with both parents; Provide physical comfort; Keep routines consistent
8 months to 2 years	Attachments are formed with caregivers from 8 to 18 months.	Will feel loss of primary caregiver	Sleep disturbances; Clingy; Crying	Keep routines consistent for sleep, caregivers as much as possible; Provide physical assurance/comfort
2 to 4 years	Developing more independence; Verbal skills developing to express feelings and needs; Can keep	May experience loss of contact with parent as abandonment; May feel sense of responsibility for	Regression - i.e., lapses in toilet training; returning to security blanket; Anxiety at bedtime; Fear of	Provide physical comfort/assurance; Allow some regression; Will adapt to longer separation with one parent through frequent

	absent parent in mind to comfort self	separation; May be anxious about needs being met food, shelter, visitation)	abandonment; Clingy; Tantrums; Irritability	visitation with the other parent.
5 to 8 years	Developing peer relationships; Moral development progresses	May feel responsible for the separation; Fantasies of reunification; Fear of abandonment; Longing for absent parent	Grief expressed through sadness and anger; Feelings of rejection and abandonment; Changes in eating and sleeping habits; Behavioral issues; Loyalty conflicts; May try to take side of absent parent	Provide opportunities to express feelings, learn coping strategies; Reassurance that they are not responsible for situation; Permission to love both parents; Participation in extracurricular activities to detach from parental problems; Benefits from exposure to both parents.
9 to 12 years	Increased awareness of self; Trying to fit in with peers	Angry about separation; May feel responsible for separation; Likely to take sides blame parent they think caused the separation; May decide one parent is "good" and the other "bad"	Intense anger; Physical complaints; Overactive to avoid thinking about separation; Feeling ashamed of situation or different from friends; More likely to ally or be alienated from one parent	Provide opportunities to express feelings and learn coping strategies; provide reassurance they are not responsible for situation; Give permission to love both parents; Participation in extracurricular activities to detach from parental problems; Benefits from exposure to both parents.
13 to 18 years	Solidifying identity and establishing self in relation to rules and regulations of society	May feel embarrassed by family break up and react by de-idealizing one or both parents; May place peer needs ahead of family and may not want to visit with non-resident parent	Withdrawal from family; Difficulty concentrating; High risk behaviors sexual promiscuity, drug or alcohol use); Worry about own future relationships	Consistent limits balanced with more freedom and choices; Allow input about visitation but do not burden with decisions about access or custody.