

Children of Divorce

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Divorce in the Classroom

- Colorado statistics
- How many students in your class/school are experiencing divorce?

- Children often think they are the only student in their class who is experiencing a divorce
- Students new to your school during the middle of the year may be moving there due to divorce

- Some child conditions may contribute to their parent's divorce
- Is the divorce rate higher for couples with special needs children?
- National Autism Association starting marital counseling program to reduce divorce rate within autism community

- Families can be dysfunctional, abusive, or negative for years before the divorce occurs
- Couples often wait until their child is older before getting a divorce, and their child may know that
- Divorce often magnifies already existing mental health, emotional, and behavioral problems

Factors that affect how children adjust to divorce

- Level of conflict between the parents
- How the parents adjust to the divorce
- Quality and amount of support available to the child
- Child's ability to deal with stress
- Age and developmental level of the child
- What the child is told about the divorce

- People with poor parenting skills tend to parent poorly during divorce
- People with good parenting skills tend to continue to parent well during divorce
- The mental health of children is often most negatively affected before the divorce occurs

Divorce and Diagnosis

- Acute Stress Disorder
- PTSD
- Panic Attacks
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Somatization
- Depression
- Dysthymia

- ADD/ADHD
- Bipolar Disorder
- Adjustment Disorder
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder

General Effects of Divorce on Children

Grief and Loss

- Child feels that a death has occurred; it has: the family has died
- Parents may not be able to treat the divorce like a loss for the child
- The children don't divorce anybody; the parents do
- The grief cycle

Regression

- Child may act like they did when they were younger or in an earlier grade
- Helplessness
- Increased attention-seeking
- Can't do tasks previously able to do
- Insecurity
- Increased anger

- Fearfulness
- Avoidance
- Self-critical, self-blaming
- Silly, don't take things serious
- Conflicts with peers
- Conflicts with adults
- Oppositional and defiant

Progression

- Child attempts or is expected to become more socially and emotionally mature
- Child becomes a “little adult”, may have to assume parenting responsibilities for self or younger siblings
- “Now you’re the man of the house”
- Child may have to parent a parent

Latency Effect

- Also called “Sleeper Effect”
- Child has to delay expression of negative effects of divorce until months or years later
- Child will appear to have initially managed divorce well

Positive Effects of Divorce

- Divorce experience may be better than having to live with parents who are in constant conflict
- Abusive parent may leave the home

General Reactions of Children to Divorce

- “Why me?”
- Somatic complaints
- School avoidance
- Emotional reactivity
- Inattention, distraction
- Loss of usual or dependable boundaries
- Sense of aloneness or abandonment

- Disorientation
- Forgetful, “spacy”
- Becoming quiet or socially withdrawn
- Loss of focus or motivation
- Poor anger control

- Loss of trust
- Doubt self and others
- Act out to see if anyone notices or cares
- Don't believe promises made by adults
- Relationship problems
- Existential questioning

Mood Changes

- Tearful, sad, easily hurt
- Depressed, flat, lethargic
- Tired; divorce takes a lot of energy
- Anxiety

Medication

- Divorce correlates with increase in Ritalin prescriptions (Canada study)
- Mood stabilizers common

Things children believe about the divorce

- “I caused the divorce”
- “I can get my mom and dad back together again”
- “I’m not a part of a family anymore”
- “I have to take care of my mom/dad”

Specific Reactions of Children to Divorce

Reactions of children ages 3-5

- Temper tantrums and sleep problems
- Hitting siblings and peers
- Fear of abandonment
- Fear they are no longer loved
- Denial that divorce happened
- Self-blame for the divorce

- Over compliance
- Fear about own safety
- Believe parents will be reunited
- Believe they are “bad”
- Confusion and frustration

Needs of children ages 3-5

- Opportunity to talk about the divorce and to ask questions
- Assurance they are not the cause of the divorce
- Permission to express their feelings
- Extra affection and reassurance they are loved

- Naming of their feelings
- Non-verbal means of expression
- Assurance they cannot reunify parents
- To be read to (there are many good storybooks about divorce)
- To know when they will see the other parent again

Reactions of children ages 6-8

- Self-blame for the divorce
- Emotional withdrawal
- Concentration difficulties
- Feelings of emptiness
- May blame one parent only
- Guilt and loyalty conflicts
- Fear of being replaced

- Fear of forever losing the parent who left the home
- Concern about being neglected or abandoned
- Hope and attempt for reunification of parents
- Anxiety

Needs of children ages 6-8

- Help with labeling and verbally expressing their feelings
- To not hear negative things about the other parent
- Assurance they will be taken care of and their needs will be met
- Extra physical affection

- Reassurance they are safe and protected
- To not just have things explained logically and rationally

Reactions of children ages 9-12

- Preoccupation with divorce
- Upset but don't know why
- Feel lonely, powerless, lost
- Susceptible to parent's attempts to make them take sides
- Sensitive to family conflict

- Ashamed about what their peers think about the divorce
- Anxiety expressed as school problems

Needs of children ages 9-12

- To be allowed to be equally loyal to both parents
- Assurance that parents are OK
- Allowed to continue to be involved with friends, school, and social activities
- Not to be pushed to grow up too fast

- Opportunity to discuss with their peers who may be going through a divorce
- Permission to have a relationship with both parents

Reactions of children ages 13-18

- Hesitate establishing their own emotional relationships
- Question commitment
- Grieve the loss of family and childhood
- Fear they will repeat parent's mistakes
- Feel rejected by by parents

- Rely more on peers for support
- Chronic fatigue
- May act out through substance abuse or delinquency
- Distance selves emotionally from family
- Worry about finances
- Self-esteem problems and depression

Needs of children ages 13-18

- Structure, guidance, protection
- Use of letter writing, poetry, journal, diary
- Appropriate outlets for expression of their feelings
- Honesty about the divorce, but not details of the marital relationship
- Clear, reasonable, and firm limits

- Time to adjust to parents who are dating
- Participation in and flexibility in setting parenting/visitation schedules
- Time spent with peers
- Avoidance of negative consequences for going to other parent's house

Children in the Middle

- Carrying messages between parents
- Put-downs of the other parent
- Money issues
- Quizzing
- Playing siblings against each other

- Guilt over parent's loneliness
- Threatening other parent with not being able to see the child

Events when both parents are
present

What kids really want to say to
their parents

Academics and Divorce

- Emotional and cognitive preoccupation
- Truancy may increase due to child now being able to exploit parental lack of supervision or communication
- Truancy or poor academic performance may increase due to child's desire to get back at parents

- Truancy or poor academic performance may increase due to child attempting to get focus off of parent's conflict onto self
- Absences and poor homework, test prep, and project completion may increase due to moves, court, therapy, conflicts in the home

- Older children may be distracted due to wanting to parent or monitor younger sibling in the same school
- Child may suddenly have new responsibilities that take away from homework, practice, participation in activities

- Homework can be disrupted by logistical factors of visitation, custody, transportation, and communication
- Child may have increased responsibilities that take away from social life and development

- Child may suddenly have less money with which to pay for clubs, activities, or sports
- School avoidance due to increased anxiety

Teacher Issues

- Class and school as a haven of stability and structure
- Child may want to stay late at school, to not go home
- Teacher may feel the child is being punished by the divorce situation
- Teacher may really want to take sides

- A parent who is willing to put their child in the middle of a divorce conflict will likely be willing to put the school in the middle
- Divorce can make it harder to get permission for field trips and activities, and child may not be able to participate for that reason alone

- Divorced or divorcing students may not tell each other, and so each thinks they are the only ones in their school or class
- Child may ask teacher questions about divorce
- Anger management
- Anxiety management

- Know when to refer child for additional help
- Child may act differently with different parent
- Parent may ask teacher not to tell things to other parent
- Child may ask teacher to keep secrets

Questions children may ask teachers about divorce

- Was the divorce my fault?
- Do my parents still love me?
- Why don't my parents get along?
- Who will take care of me?
- Can I get my parents back together again by being good?
- Will I have to move?

- Will I have to change schools?
- What should I tell my friends?
- What should I do when my parents yell at each other?
- Will everyone else know?

Legal Issues

- Education is often a significant factor in divorce conflicts, and is one of the main issues in settlements
- Parent or attorney may seek evidence from teacher or school staff that child is being negatively affected (or positively, or not at all) by the divorce or by the other parent

- CASA or GAL may have legal right or duty to interview teacher about child's functioning
- Child may need additional security due to parent attempting to kidnap
- Changes in who is allowed to pick up or see child at school

- Ensure teachers are aware of custody status
- Require parent to show legal documentation of sole custody arrangement
- Maintain office list of children and their custodial parents
- Teachers should know how to seek legal advice from district's legal staff

10 main divorce issues for school administrators

- School territorial rights
- Parental access to school records
- Release of child from school
- School visits
- Medical emergencies
- Financial responsibilities

- Child's surname
- Retention
- Confidentiality of records
- Parental access to school functions

Interventions

- Make the school the normative environment
- Know how to refer to the school psychologist or counselor
- Refer to AUMHC Child and Family South team divorce group
- Refer for medication evaluation
- Books about divorce for kids

- Ask parents at early conferences to report family changes throughout the year
- Have extra school supplies available for students who live in two homes
- Ask students for their input about back to school night, parent conferences, and other school events

- Be prepared to emotionally support single parents and parents who may ask for your advice
- Provide extra emotional support to students going through divorce
- Don't take sides such that the child knows; talk to your colleagues about your feelings

- In high conflict divorces, do not be in room alone with parents

