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Newsletter

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Divorce and Impact on Children

What I can do is try to distinguish some general ways children (up through about age 8 or 9) often react to parental divorce in contrast to how adolescents (beginning around ages 9 - 13) often respond. Understand that I am talking here about tendencies, not certainties.

Divorce introduces a massive change into the life of a boy or girl no matter what the age. Witnessing loss of love between parents, having parents break their marriage commitment, adjusting to going back and forth between two different households, and the daily absence of one parent while living with the other, all create a challenging new family circumstance in which to live. In the personal history of the boy or girl, parental divorce is a watershed event. Life that follows is significantly changed from how life was before.

Somewhat different responses to this painful turn of events occur if the boy or girl is still in childhood or has entered adolescence. Basically, divorce tends to intensify the child's dependence and it tends to accelerate the adolescent's independence; it often elicits a more regressive response in the child and a more aggressive response in the adolescent. Consider why this variation may be so.

The child's world is a dependent one, closely connected to parents who are favored companions, heavily reliant on parental care, with family the major locus of one's social life. The adolescent world is a more independent one, more separated and distant from parents, more self-sufficient, where friends have become favored companions, and where the major locus of one's social life now extends outside of family into a larger world of life experience.

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For the young child, divorce shakes trust in dependency on parents who now behave in an extremely undependable way. They surgically divide the family unit into two different households between which the child must learn to transit back and forth, for a while creating unfamiliarity, instability, and insecurity, never being able to be with one parent without having to be apart from the other.



Convincing a young child of the permanence of divorce can be hard when his intense longing fantasizes that somehow, some way, mom and dad will be living back together again someday. He relies on wishful thinking to help allay the pain of loss, holding onto hope for a parental reunion much longer than does the adolescent who is quicker to accept the finality of this unwelcome family change. Thus parents who put in a joint presence at special family celebrations and holiday events to recreate family closeness for the child only feed the child's fantasy and delay his adjustment.

The dependent child's short term reaction to divorce can be an anxious one. So much is different, new, unpredictable, and unknown that life becomes filled with scary questions? "What is going to happen to next?" "Who will take care of me?" "If my parents can lose for each other, can they lose love for me?" "With one parent moving out, what if I lose the other too?" Answering such worry questions with worst fears, the child's response can be regressive.

By reverting to a former way of functioning, more parental care-taking may be forthcoming. There can be separation anxieties, crying at bed times, breaking toilet training, bed-wetting, clinging, whining, tantrums, and temporary loss of established self-care skills, all of which can compel parental attention.

The child wants to feel more connected in a family situation where a major disconnection has occurred. Regression to earlier dependency can partly be an effort to elicit parental concern, bringing them close when divorce has pulled each of them further away - the resident parent now busier and more preoccupied, the absent parent simply less available because of being less around.

Many adults assume that children, from birth to five years of age, aren't really affected by divorce. Because they don't understand it, then it must not be a big deal. Sadly, this couldn't be farther from the truth. If you have an infant, toddler, or preschooler, and you are going through a divorce (or about to), it's important to understand the impact it may have on them.

Stress affects people of all ages – from a newborn baby to an elderly adult. And let's face it – divorce is almost always very stressful. For children, divorce creates a significant disruption in their routine and home life. What was once predictable is now uncertain. Their basic sense of security and safety can be impacted as they wonder where they will live and who's going to tuck them in at night.



If there is fighting, yelling, breaking things, or other chaos going on as well, infants and young children can become very anxious. It is not uncommon for them to regress during such upheaval in the home. They may exhibit more signs of illness, or become unusually fussy or irritable. If you are particularly anxious or distressed, your child will pick up on it and will often feel anxious and distressed as well. Your infant may be less responsive to your attempts to soothe him.

Toddlers may find divorce particularly confusing. They recognize that one parent is gone from the home, but they have no idea why. They may become moody, anxious, or more aggressive. They often will act out more frequently as a way to express the troubling feelings they can't put into words. Separation anxiety may be a frequent issue for both infants and toddlers during this time.

Preschoolers, unlike infants and toddlers, often believe they somehow caused their parents' divorce or separation. They often think it's because they behaved badly or weren't good enough. Or, they may believe that something they said in anger made one of the parents leave. As a result, they often think it's their responsibility to fix it – to get Mom and Dad back together. And that's a tremendous pressure for a young child to feel.

Fear of abandonment can be significant for preschoolers during a divorce. They may experience a lot of sadness, especially if they were particularly attached to the parent that is no longer living in the home. Like toddlers, they may act out their feelings of hurt, fear, and grief. They may also get very angry at the parent they believe is responsible for the situation. While they may show their anger with aggressive behavior, they may also become more withdrawn and depressed.

How well your children adjust during and following a divorce will be impacted by several factors. First, the better their relationship with both you and the other parent, the better their adjustment will be. Second, they will fare much better if at least one of you (and preferably both) is able to adequately attend to their needs during the divorce. Third, the less conflict between you and the other parent, the better off your children will be. Fourth, a long, drawn out divorce will take a greater toll on them than a shorter one.

Don't underestimate the positive affect you can have on your children as you go through your divorce. Yes – it is going to be very challenging for you, and you may want to shout, scream, cry for hours, or break every dish you own. But the best thing you can do is find a way to keep your emotions (and actions) from spiraling out of control in front of them. Strive to put their needs first and give them the attention they need during this difficult time.

Research comparing children of divorced parents to children with married parents shows:

- Children from divorced homes suffer academically. They experience high levels of behavioral problems. Their grades suffer, and they are less likely to graduate from high school.
- Kids whose parents divorce are substantially more likely to be incarcerated for committing a crime as a juvenile.



- Because the custodial parent's income drops substantially after a divorce, children in divorced homes are almost five times more likely to live in poverty than are children with married parents.
- Teens from divorced homes are much more likely to engage in drug and alcohol use, as well as sexual intercourse than are those from intact families.

Before you say, "Not my kid," remember that the children and teens represented in these statistics are normal kids, probably not much different from yours. Their parents didn't think they would get involved in these things, either. Again, we're looking at increased *risks*.

A few more statistics to consider:

- Children from divorced homes experience illness more frequently and recover from sickness more slowly. They are also more likely to suffer child abuse.
- Children of divorced parents suffer more frequently from symptoms of psychological distress. And the emotional scars of divorce last into adulthood.

The scope of this last finding – children suffer emotionally from their parents' divorce – has been largely underestimated. Obviously, not every child of divorce commits crime or drops out of school. Some do well in school and even become high achievers. However, we now know that even these children experience deep and lasting emotional trauma. For *all* children, their parents' divorce colors their view of the world and relationships for the rest of their lives.

Wallerstein Study

Psychologist Judith Wallerstein followed a group of children of divorce from the 1970s into the 1990s. Interviewing them at 18 months and then 5, 10, 15 and 25 years after the divorce, she expected to find that they had bounced back. But what she found was dismaying: Even 25 years after the divorce, these children continued to experience substantial expectations of failure, fear of loss, fear of change and fear of conflict. Twenty-five years!

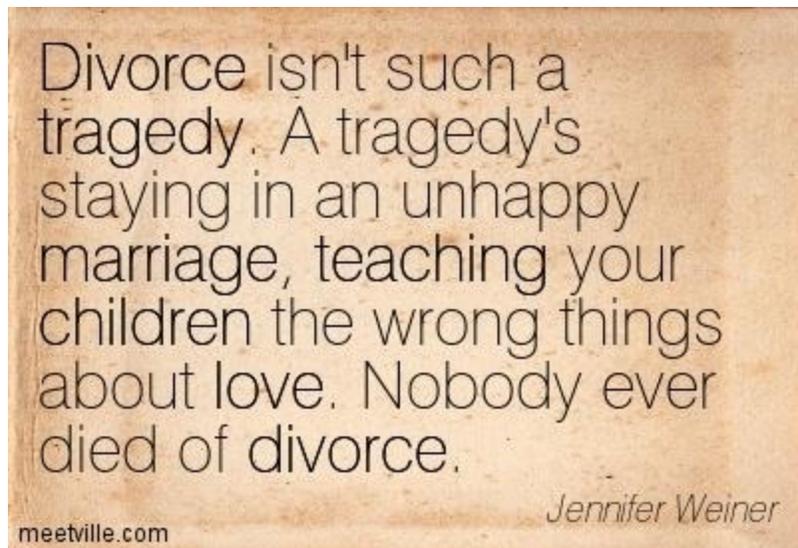
The children in Wallerstein's study were especially challenged when they began to form their own romantic relationships. As Wallerstein explains, "Contrary to what we have long thought, the major impact of divorce does not occur during childhood or adolescence. Rather, it rises in adulthood as serious romantic relationships move center stage.

Not an Easy Out

What parents see as a quick way out often results in emotional damage that the children will carry for 30 years or more. Divorce is no small thing to children. It is the violent ripping apart of their parents, a loss of stability and often a complete shock. While we often think of children as resilient, going through such trauma is a lot to ask of our kids.

In light of the fact that most marriages heading for divorce can be salvaged and turned into great marriages, parents should take a long pause before choosing divorce. While it may seem like a solution to you, it's not an easy out for you or your kids.

However in addition to this one also needs to consider the impact on the child if the marriage is violent and aggressive, in this instance the child and the spouse can only benefit from a divorce, to be safe and rather learn that relationships and marriages are not about violence and control.



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