

Divorce Matters: A Child's View

Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Children look at the world differently than adults. Much of what they understand about divorce depends on their age. A toddler will not understand as much as a 5-year-old understands. A school-age boy will not handle his emotions the same way his teenage sister will.

Studies show that children experience the greatest impact from divorce within two or three years of its occurrence. However, research also shows that children are greatly affected by divorce throughout their youth. At each age, there are certain feelings and reactions that children will experience.

How divorce impacts children

- They display a wide range of emotions.
- They express their pain and anger differently at different ages.
- They may turn their anger and pain inward and withdraw.
- They may turn their anger and pain outward and misbehave.
- They may feel responsible.
- They may fear abandonment.
- They may show symptoms of physical illness.
- They may improve their behavior thinking it could save the marriage.

INFANTS

What do they understand?

Infants do not understand anything about separation or divorce, but they do notice changes in their parents' responses to them.



How do they react?

- Infants may experience changes in their eating or sleeping patterns.
- They may have bowel problems such as diarrhea or constipation, or they may spit up more frequently.
- Infants may seem more fretful, fearful, or anxious.

What can parents do?

- Parents can try to keep a normal routine.
- They can try to remain calm in front of their baby.
- Parents can try to rest while their baby sleeps.

- They can ask family or friends for help.
- Parents can remember that even infants need contact with both of their parents.

TODDLERS

What do they understand?

Toddlers understand that one parent no longer lives at home, although they don't know why.



How do they react?

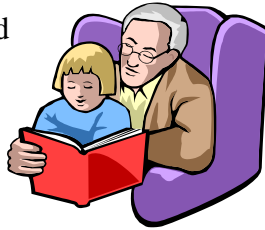
- Toddlers cry more and become clingy.
- They have problems sleeping and experience changes in their toilet habits.
- Toddlers return to baby-like behavior such as demanding to be fed by their parents.
- They often feel angry or frustrated about the situation, but cannot understand or explain their feelings.
- Toddlers may express anger by throwing temper tantrums, acting sulky, hitting, being

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- irritable and reckless, or withdrawing.
- Toddlers may start worrying about any kind of separation and may become fearful when a parent is out of sight.

What can parents do?

- Parents can provide nurturing and reassurance.
- They can continue establishing routines.
- Parents can allow some baby-like behavior, but must set clear limits and consequences.
- They can keep daily stress to a minimum by allowing their toddler extra time to complete tasks.
- Parents can try to spend time alone with their child.
- They can let their child spend time with another adult such as a grandparent or family friend who is the same sex as the parent who does not live at home.



PRESCHOOLERS

What do they understand?

- Preschoolers still don't understand what separation or divorce means, but they know their parents are angry and upset, and they live apart.



How do they react?

- Preschoolers feel a sense of loss and sorrow.
- They are likely to have fantasies, both pleasant - "Daddy will come back" - and frightening - "Monsters chased me."
- Preschoolers wonder what will happen to them and fear being abandoned by their noncustodial parent.
- They often blame themselves for the separation or divorce. They think if they had behaved better, their parents would have stayed together.
- Preschoolers may feel responsible. When being punished, perhaps the child wished one parent would go away and now that parent is gone. The child may believe that the wish is what made the parent leave.

- Preschoolers often become very angry, which they show by attacking the parent they blame or by turning their anger inward and becoming depressed or withdrawn.

What can parents do?

- Parents can encourage their child to share questions and concerns about the separation or divorce.
- They can encourage their child to express feelings, including anger, through talking, physical activity, or artwork.
- Parents can set aside time daily to reassure their child that both parents understand and love him or her.
- They can tell their child, repeatedly if needed, that he or she isn't responsible for the divorce.

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 Oesterreich, L. (1996). Divorce matters series, A
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 University Extension.
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