

Divorce: A Parents' Guide for Supporting Children

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Today, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly half of all first marriages end in divorce. Two thirds of these situations involve children. What effect will divorce have on children in both the short and long term? Differing advice from experts in the field as well as “expert advice” in the media adds to parents’ anxiety about divorce.

The good news is that, in the long term, approximately 80% of children of divorced parents become productive, well-adjusted, and successful adults. As they get older, their parents’ divorce becomes more and more a distant memory of a painful time, and a less active influence in their lives.

The other 20% of these children experience a variety of ongoing psychological and social difficulties that significantly interfere with their lives. As adults these people are twice as likely to experience mental illness, substance abuse, and failed relationships. In children, warning signs of coping difficulties can include problems in sleeping or eating, increased anger or sadness, fears, or regression.

Understanding the risk factors and what to expect at each stage of a child’s development will help parents promote their children’s successful adjustment and growth as the family goes through the divorce process.

Adjustment to Divorce Is an Ongoing Process

Children take many routes through divorce, depending heavily on the risks and protections they encounter along the way. It is difficult to predict exactly how divorce will affect a specific child. Parents can best help their children by providing as many protections as possible early on in the divorce process, knowing that no one can control all those factors and no one can protect children completely from all risks.

The most difficult time for children and, indeed, for everyone in the family, is the first year after the divorce because there are so many changes for everyone involved. By the second year, things typically begin to improve dramatically as parents get back on their feet and the family becomes more stable.

Key Risks and Protections for Children in Divorcing Families

Conflict between parents. Conflict between parents can be a key part of the divorce process, especially during the time immediately before and after the actual divorce. Witnessing conflict can be particularly confusing to the children because they love both parents and are generally torn in their loyalties to each of them.

While it is often difficult, if not impossible, to shield children from all parental conflict, it is important to do so. Parents must agree to put their children first by keeping them out of parental disagreements and holding such discussions away from the children.

It is especially harmful when parents involve the children, deliberately or by accident, in their conflicts by doing things such as complaining to the child about the other parent or by having the children pass on messages for the parents.

Turning children into “little adults.” Separation and divorce lead the single parents to shoulder increased work and responsibility within the home. Children of divorce often have increased responsibility, independence, and interdependence. This can be a positive outcome of this situation.

Trouble brews, however, when children are asked to shoulder more of the physical or emotional load than they are developmentally ready to manage. This can happen when one parent begins to lean on a child, often the eldest daughter or son, for emotional support or as a confidant in the absence of a spouse. While most children willingly try to meet their parent's need for support, they tend to be psychologically unable to fulfill such an adult role and can grow up with lingering feelings of inadequacy and failure.

Parents can help by allowing their children to experience the joys and fewer responsibilities of childhood as much as possible. Parents can also develop and maintain their connections with other adults to meet their own needs for companionship and emotional support.

Parenting style. Parenting style is an important factor in children's response to divorce. Some parents are generally warm and accepting of their children, but do not generally set limits or enforce rules or structure in the family. At times, they and their children appear to be almost peers or friends. Children raised in this way are less likely to develop good self-control and can be aggressive or impulsive.

Other parents harshly enforce a variety of rigid rules at home with less warmth or respect for the children. Children raised in this way may turn out to be angry, defiant, and dishonest in dealing with others.

Still other parents neglect their children for the sake of their own needs and are simply not there for their children. Children raised in this way may develop a variety of psychological or behavioral problems.

The most protective style of parenting, and the one associated with the most well-adjusted children, is one where parents have rules, structure, and expectations for appropriate behavior. They are not afraid to back up these expectations with fair, consistent discipline. These parents are clearly the adults in the family, but they show respect and love for their children. This style of raising children is probably the most powerful protection against the risks associated with divorce. To the extent that each parent can use this style of parenting, the children will fare better.

The role of schools and adults outside the family. Sometimes children have connections with schools, teachers, coaches, clergy, counselors, or other adults who use the same caring, consistent, and structured approach that is most successful for parents. The positive effects of these adults can be significant protective factors for children from divorced families. Divorcing parents are thus advised to seek out these positive relationships for their children by contacting the staff at school, involving their children in structured extracurricular activities, or by seeking support from their religious community.

Change in the family's standard of living. Most families experience a significant drop in income after a divorce. Money once applied to one household now supports two, and single mothers frequently earn less than single fathers. It is often impossible to stay in the same home, attend the same school, and have the same lifestyle that the family enjoyed before the divorce. This is a common and often unavoidable risk in divorced families because maintaining economic stability is clearly a protective factor for children.

Parents can help ease this problem by having their children stay in touch with friends from the previous school and participating in expensive activities in a more inexpensive fashion such as renting videos instead of going out to a current movie.

A child's own strengths and weaknesses. A good predictor of adjustment following divorce is the child's adjustment before the divorce. Children who had experienced behavioral, learning, or mental health problems before the divorce often continue to experience these problems after divorce, and these issues constitute a risk factor for healthy development. Similarly, children who before divorce were resilient, emotionally secure, responsible, and independent tend to bring these same qualities forward as protective factors during the divorce process.

Young children: Specific risks. Young children frequently do not fully understand what is happening when their parents divorce. They may believe that they caused the divorce or fantasize about their parents getting back together. They may have fears of being abandoned and worry about who will take care of them. Parents should reassure children that the divorce was not their fault, that they still love them, and that they will continue to take care of them.

Adolescents: Specific risks. Adolescence can be a time of conflict in all families as young people work to separate from parents and begin young adulthood. In divorced families, these conflicts can often last longer than in non-divorced families. Girls in divorced families who mature early physically may be at increased risk for early sexual activity. Peers become exceptionally important influences in adolescence, and they can act as risks or protections, depending on the peer group. Adolescents continue to need structure, discipline, and respect from their parents. Mentors, teachers, coaches, and other involved adults can also provide protective support.

Impact of Child Custody

As long as the custodial parent is loving, consistent, and provides structure and discipline, children can do well in families where either parent has custody or in joint custody arrangements. Children are most influenced by the parent they spend the most time with, but the non-custodial parent can exert an important additional protective influence if he or she remains involved with the children.

It is generally in the children's long-term interest to have continuing and meaningful contact with both parents after a divorce.

According to research, roughly 60% of parents remarry six years after the divorce. With remarriage often comes a better standard of living, better schools for the children, and mutual emotional support for the parents. However, about 60% of these remarriages end in divorce. Often disagreement about raising the children is one of the issues of conflict between the new spouses.

Stepparenting is very difficult, and parents can enter a remarriage with unrealistic expectations about instantly bonding with stepchildren or quickly developing a close, smoothly running family. Differences in parenting styles, expectations for the children, and working out disciplinary roles can create stress for the new couple. Developing a working relationship between the children and stepparent is crucial in successful and happy remarriages.

Stepfamilies take time, effort, and patience to develop. It is usually best, especially at first, for the parent to continue as the primary disciplinarian, with the stepparent in a supporting role. However, parents also have to be willing to share parental roles that they once controlled exclusively themselves.

The stepparent's main role is to try to develop a relationship with the stepchildren. One way to build relationships is to create family routines, customs, and traditions within the new family so that children begin to develop routines and memories that include the stepparent. Stepparents should not try to criticize or replace the non-custodial parent. This usually ends up hurting the step-parent's relationship with the children.

Finally, it is important for the new spouses to nurture their relationship as a couple. Be careful not to lose sight of the children, but take opportunities to go out alone, find mutual interests, and find meaningful "adult time" together.

Conclusion

Parenting children through a divorce is a tough challenge. Reducing risks and building in protections is the way to help children navigate this journey safely. With affectionate, yet firm, consistent parenting, children from divorced families can grow up to be successful, happy adults.

Resources

Hannibal, M. E. (2002). *Good parenting through your divorce*. New York: Marlowe & Co. ISBN 1-56924-555-X.

Covers parents' most commonly asked questions about raising children during the divorce process.

Hetherington, E. M., & Kelly, J. (2002). *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*. New York: W.W. Norton. ISBN 0-393-04862-4.

Written for parents. This very readable book describes a multi-year study of many divorced families and how they adjusted over time. Much of the information in this handout was adapted from the information in this book.

Neuman, M. G. (1998). *Helping your kids cope with divorce the Sandcastles way*. New York: Times Books. ISBN 0-8129-2902-0.

Written for parents. Provides a complete guide to helping children on their journey through the parent's divorce, including concrete information about how to handle issues and conflicts that come up at every stage of a child's development.

Website

Divorce Headquarters—www.divorcehq.com

Like many websites devoted to divorce, this one places the emphasis on the legal issues involved with visitation, child support, taxes, insurance, and rights. It is a comprehensive, however, and includes a number of useful links to other sites concerning divorce.

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