

Parent Resource:

Helping Children Cope with Divorce

While the divorce rate is declining, 40-50% of marriages still end in divorce. Many students will grow up with divorced parents, and it is important to understand the reactions to divorce and how to help students cope.

First, not all students struggle with their experience of divorce! Amicable divorces occur and we don't want to assume all reactions are the same. Researchers have shown that children's reactions to divorce or a major family change depend on many factors, including on their age and developmental stage at the time the divorce occurs. Below you will see the typical feelings and behaviors associated with each approximate age range.

Ages 5-8: Great sadness, fear, insecurity, helplessness, guilt, blame, abandonment by the missing parent. Some don't understand the change and have feelings of confusion and loss of control. They may act to gain attention when they are not receiving as much, or they may have some behavior challenges as they grasp at whatever control they can get.

Ages 9-12: Loneliness, loss, shock, surprise, fear; but anger and possibly the rejection of one parent are the predominant reactions of this age group. Behaviors may become more rebellious to gain attention or control, and friendships may change as children seek out friends with similar backgrounds or struggles.

Ages 13-18: Adolescents whose parents are divorcing also experience loss, sadness, anger, and pain. A typical adolescent reaction to parental divorce, however, often involves acting-out behaviors. Sexual promiscuity, delinquency, the use of alcohol and drugs, and aggressive behavior have all been identified as adolescent reactions to parental divorce.

Symptoms to watch for at all ages:

1. Emotional reactions (crying, begging, temper outbursts) around separation or transferring from one home to another
2. Social withdrawal and academic decline
4. Marked increase in acting out or regressive behaviors (thumb-sucking, bed-wetting)
5. Pseudo-maturity by suppressing emotions of divorce and assuming parental roles - "parentification"
6. Psychosomatic complaints in response to sadness, stress or frustration; stomachaches, headaches, feeling tired

IN-SCHOOL REACTIONS

Studies have shown that teachers frequently report observing changes in academic achievement, moods, attendance patterns, and behavior of children adjusting to their parents' divorce. It is important not to assume that a child struggles because he or she is experiencing a divorce, but focus on changes caused by divorce (e.g., single-parent homes, changes in routines and lifestyles, visitation patterns with relatives) and their positive, negative, or neutral effects on the children.

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How to Help

1. Encourage the student to express their feelings associated with the separation/divorce
2. Explore factors contributing to student's feeling of guilt about the separation/divorce
3. Encourage parents to give each child an allotted time of undivided attention each day
4. Assist parents in establishing a routine of positive activities for the student
5. Demonstrate genuine interest and positive regard to promote self-esteem
6. Use art, games, play or role-plays to help the student express their feelings about the divorce
7. Identify common problems associated with divorce/separation and validate feelings as okay
8. Discuss positive ways family and friends can help in adjustment

Divorce/Separation Resources

Websites

Kids in the Middle

<http://www.kidsinthemiddle.org/>

Kids in the Middle provides comprehensive services for children struggling with their parents' divorce, separation, or remarriage. <http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index.htmlx>

Banana Splits by Elizabeth McGonagle

A school/parent support program for children of divorce, distributed by Interact Simulations, Inc. <http://www.interact-simulations.com> This program includes an extensive bibliography of articles and books on the topic of divorce and how it affects children, families, and schools.

Read a Banana Splits success story at <http://zdsconsulting.com>