

Child Development and Divorce

Most divorcing parents with children feel concerned about how their divorce will affect their child – and how they can help their child through the divorce process. You are not alone, but there are some important things you do need to know. It is important for you to know how divorce can impact your child's development, how to promote resilience in your child, what healthy child development looks like, and what the warning signs are that your child is experiencing more serious distress.

The Effect of Divorce on Child Development

Most children of divorced parents do not have significant or diagnosable mental health problems (Clark, 2014). However, most children of divorcing parents do experience distressing emotions, and divorce increases risk for negative outcomes for children, even into adulthood.

Divorce may increase risks for negative outcomes in physical, mental, and psychosocial well-being during childhood, especially in academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept and social relationships (Clark, 2013). Divorce may increase risks for negative outcomes for children of divorce into adulthood, with possible increases in educational failure, risky sexual behavior, unplanned pregnancies, earlier marriage or cohabitation, poverty, and marital discord and divorce (Clark, 2013). Some of the negative effects of divorce that children experience may actually be related to how parents respond to divorce rather than the divorce itself (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Children experience their parents' divorce in different ways based on many different factors, including the amount of marital conflict and post-marital conflict. During the divorce process, children commonly feel sad, confused, angry, guilty, lonely, worried about what will happen to them, and fear of abandonment.

Your child will likely feel all of these emotions, and go through different stages of emotion and change. Know also that children often act out what they do not know how to say. They may act out their emotions through emotional outbursts, decreased school performance, and conduct problems, and many other negative behaviors (Texas Attorney General, 2008). Having their parent's divorce significant life change and psychosocial stressor for them, and these emotions and behaviors are normal. However, children need parental support throughout the process.

How you respond to your child will greatly impact his or her well-being, in both the short and long-term. Children need help recognizing and dealing with their emotions and knowing how to effectively cope with stress. You can help promote resilience in your child during the divorce process. Watch for warning signs that your child is experiencing more serious distress.

Healthy Child Development and Signs of Distress

There are different stages of development your child will go through until he reaches adulthood and becomes fully autonomous. In each stage, your child will progress toward increasing autonomy. Scholars generally agree that in each stage of development, children must successfully complete a major task of development in order for healthy development to occur. Parents can have a profound impact on their children's development.

Infant to Toddler (Zero to Three-Years-Old)

The main task in this stage of development for your baby or toddler is to learn to seek and receive physical and emotional support and comfort from adults (Sanders, 2007). To complete this task, your child needs to have competent caregivers. During the first year of life, your child is forming attachments to primary caregivers. Your child can form healthy attachments when you meet your child's basic needs in a timely, consistent, and sensitive manner and show them love. Feed them when they are hungry, ensure that they sleep when they are tired, and meet all of their basic needs. Show them love and affection; comfort them often.

In this stage of development, you will see remarkable growth in your child. Your child will become increasingly mobile and communicative. Your child will start teething (6-8 months), crawling (9-12 months), self-feeding, walking (around age 1), and gaining increased bladder and bowel control (around age 2). Children in this stage of development are developmentally vulnerable, due to their rapid physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth in this period. For their brains and bodies to develop well and fully, children depend on quality care. Consistency in routine and care from parents will help them to learn and grow (Clark, 2014). Minimize disruptions and changes for your baby/toddler as much as you can (Texas Attorney General).

Babies and toddlers in this developmental phase assess their safety by relying mainly on non-verbal behaviors from caregivers (Sanders, 2007). They can pretty accurately assess emotion, touch, and eye contact (Sanders, 2007). If they assess a caregiver to be distressed, they may become distressed as this is a threat to their safety.

Signs of distress for babies include excessive crying, irritability, problems with feeding or sleeping, withdrawal, separation anxiety, and developmental regression. (Clark, 2014). Signs of distress for toddlers include nightmares, mood changes, and changes in toileting behavior (Texas Attorney General, 2008).

Nearly all parents during this phase of their child's development could benefit from a parenting class, newsletter, or books (Sanders, 2007). Parent support groups and play groups can be great places to learn helpful information (Sanders, 2007).

Parents with addiction and mental health struggles need to seek counseling during this stage of their child's development, in order to ensure healthy attachment for their child.

Pre-school Age Children (Three to Five-Years-Old)

The task of the preschooler's stage of development is "to safely experiment with independence" (Sanders, 2007, p. 70). Learning to explore and interact with the world from a place of safety – having a secure parental base – helps a child become ready for later stages of development (Sanders, 2007).

In this stage of development, children typically gain their first permanent teeth and stronger voices. They have alert brains, and increased coordination of their hands and bodies. In this phase, children continue to develop more sophisticated cognitive skills, and long term memory stabilizes around age five and six. Many children in this stage begin some form of pre-school and/or activities such as sports or music.

Preschoolers are normally and necessarily focused on themselves (Sanders, 2007). They think that nearly everything has something to do directly with them (Sanders, 2007).

Children in this stage tend to personalize negative interactions between parents as being their fault, and blame themselves for their parents' divorce. Parents need to ensure that their children know that the divorce is not their fault. At this age, children may become increasingly clingy, with separation anxiety and fears of abandonment (Clark, 2014).

Children in this stage are also developmentally vulnerable due to their bodies' rapid physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional growth (Clark, 2014). Quality parenting in this stage is very important to your child's development and ability to regulate stress and emotional arousal (Clark, 2014).

Young children need a predictable, stable, and safe environment (Sanders, 2007). They need continual access to caregivers who are emotionally available and able to respond to their needs in a consistent and sensitive way (Sanders, 2007).

Signs of distress for children in this stage include toileting and sleep problems (Texas Attorney General, 2008). These are signs of developmental regression, rather than progression.

During this stage of their children's development, parents may find parenting coaches and coordinators to be good resources (Sanders, 2007). They can help parents make effective child-based parenting plans and schedules for children, and they can teach decision making that will help the parents throughout their children's lives (Sanders, 2007). Parents with impairments of any kind, including

unresolved anger, need to seek therapy before their children exit this stage of development (Sanders, 2007).

School-Age Children (Five to Twelve-Years-Old)

The task for the school-age child (age five to twelve) is to learn to effectively relate to the larger world (Sanders, 2007). In this phase, school begins. This separates the child from his/her parent (his/her secure base) for longer periods of time (Sanders, 2007). The child will need to learn to manage elementary school, and being away from his/her parent for a long period of time (Sanders, 2007). Children need learn to soothe and protect themselves, make decisions independently, and find ways to seek help and comfort from persons other than their parents (Sanders, 2007).

Children in this stage of development gain increased muscular ability and coordination. Children in this stage develop increased reasoning about their experiences. They become more aware of and sensitive to the differences between homes (Sanders, 2007). In this stage, school and extracurricular activities are a large part of children's lives. Additionally, in this stage, girls' growth rate exceeds boys'.

Children in this stage have dichotomous thinking; they tend to see things in black and white terms. School-age children have a strong sense of rules and fairness. Children at this age are learning right from wrong. They may even align themselves with one parent and have loyalty conflicts. They may try to re-unite parents. Encourage your children to love both parents.

As they progress through this stage, children become more self-sufficient. By age six, they will likely have established long term memory. School-age children need to continue to develop peer relationships and participate in activities they enjoy (Sanders, 2007). Support your child's school and other activities and friendships, as they are a large part of your child's life.

Because elementary stage children are much more advanced than preschoolers and toddlers, parents tend to minimize the level of care they need (Sanders, 2007). They need a high level of routine, predictability and security in order to accomplish their developmental task (Sanders, 2007).

Signs of distress at this age include intense expressions of anger, drop in school performance, sleep problems, and physical complaints, loss of interest in friends, becoming a perfectionist, anxiety, depression, isolation, bullying, and victimization (Texas Attorney General, 2008). Sometimes, signs of distress include physical complaints of stomachaches or headaches.

Almost all parents with children in this stage of development can benefit from a parenting class at this point (Sanders, 2007). Most childhood disorders, including mood and learning disorders, are diagnosed during this stage of development. If

your child displays abnormal symptoms that persist and that concern you, discuss your concerns with a mental health professional. If your child is diagnosed with a disorder, be willing to help your child by providing him or her with outside resources (Sanders, 2007). If parents have a high amount of conflict during this time, therapy for the child can be very helpful during this stage (Sanders, 2007).

Adolescence (Thirteen to Eighteen-Years-Old)

This stage of development consists of multiple tasks for adolescents (ages thirteen to eighteen). Adolescents must learn to independence in a healthy way, experiment with their identity, and create a broader world view (Sanders, 2007). This is a complicated, but highly rewarding stage (Sanders, 2007). Despite their move toward independence, adolescents need a secure parental base to negotiate this phase successfully (Sanders, 2007). Adolescents need a balance of freedom and structure from parents. (Sanders, 2007) Teens in this age group are learning to be independent to prepare for the separation from their parents, but they still need support and rules. The challenge for parents of teens is to stay connected with their teens, while also honoring their teens' struggles for independence and increased agency in making choices (Hutchison, 2011).

Adolescents in this age group are going through or have gone through puberty. Girls develop breasts and pubic hair, have complexion changes, and begin menstruation cycles. Boys develop pubic hair, sperm, and deeper voices, and have complexion changes. During adolescence, personality and identity become consolidated, and peers become the reference group for daily activities and many decisions. Teens are eager to be accepted and to belong.

Teens often prefer to spend more time with friends than family. The teen's need for interaction with a parent may seem to diminish, but their need for a strong parental presence actually increases during this phase. Parents remain important and actually have a strong influence in many areas including academic choices, health, moral values, and activities (Clark, 2014). Teens need firm and consistent but fair guidelines and positive parental role models.

Signs of distress in this age group may include excessive anger or isolation (Texas Attorney General, 2008). Signs of distress also include difficulty with school or peers, alcohol and drug use, sexual acting out and a decline in school performance (Texas Attorney General, 2008).

Classes on parenting teenagers are invaluable for nearly all parents during this phase as this phase is extremely complicated (Sanders, 2007). Parents with impairments of any kind are encouraged to seek treatment (Sanders, 2007). During this phase, many mental health issues first appear for teens, including depression, anxiety, and Bipolar disorder, among others. If your teen displays persistent or extreme changes in behavior that concern you, discuss these concerns with a mental

health professional. Be prepared to help your teen with mental health challenges by providing them resources.

Special Considerations

If your child has a disability or ongoing or severe mental health issues, you must take this into consideration in your parenting (Sanders, 2007). Depending on the issue, your child may develop differently than other children in their age group, and need special consideration and resources. If you or the other parent has an impaired ability to care for a child, take that into consideration in developing your parenting plan.

If you notice warning signs of distress in your child that persist or worsen, take your child to see a counselor, psychologist, social worker, or doctor. They can provide further support for your child during the difficult process of divorce.

You can make a significant difference in your child's developmental growth. You can help promote resilience within your child during the divorce process, so that your child has less severe outcomes in the short and long-term.

Promoting Resilience in Your Child during the Divorce Process

The three most significant factors for your child's well-being during the divorce process include: 1. the quality of your parenting; 2. the quality of the parent-child relationship; and 3. the frequency, intensity and duration of hostile conflict (Clark, 2014). Improving these areas may improve outcomes for your child (Clark, 2014). You have the opportunity to change the course of your child's outcomes for the better through effective parenting, building a strong parent-child relationship, and eliminating hostile conflict.

Parent Effectively

Effective parenting can help protect children from the damaging effects of the divorce process and promote resilience in children. Effective parenting consists of love and nurture for children, along with effective discipline and limit-setting (Clark, 2014).

Parents need to express their love for their children openly and often. During the divorce process, reassure your child often that you still love him/her, and that your love will not change, even though your divorce is changing many things. Parents can express love through kind words, saying "I love you," spending quality time with their children, and in many small, but frequent ways.

Love for a child should never be confused with a lack of limits or consequences. Effective parenting is characterized by clear guidelines, developmentally appropriate expectations, appropriate positive and negative reinforcement and

limit-setting for children. Limits and discipline help children adapt to change by increasing the predictability of their environment and fostering their sense of control. Children do well with consistent routines, so they can know what to expect, which in turn helps them feel safe and more confident.

In the process of divorce, there are several additional things you need to do to be an effective parent. Following are six important ways you can help the divorce process go more smoothly for your child:

1. Be very clear to your child that she is not the reason you are getting a divorce. Because of their level of cognitive development, many children, especially young children, take the divorce personally and will believe and worry that they are the reason for the divorce. Communicate very clearly to your child that this is an adult problem, and not her fault (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014). Help her understand that there was nothing that she could have done to prevent it and nothing that she – or others -- can do to change the divorce: it is final (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014).
2. Encourage your child to talk openly about his feelings, often. When he talks, listen carefully and try not to interrupt. It is normal for children to have trouble expressing their feelings, so be patient (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014). Though it may be hard, it is important to let them be honest about their feelings. If you listen with empathy, and without judgment or harsh words such as “stop being a baby” or “just grow up”, your child is much more likely to feel safe with you, and share their personal emotions with you. Parents need to learn to reflect understanding, allow silence and respond with empathy. If your child does not share, do not force him to share his emotions with you. He will do so when he feels safe. If he feels uncomfortable talking to you about the divorce or his emotions, you may consider finding him a counselor (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014).
3. Help your child understand that she is not alone in this situation. If possible and appropriate, seek out other families with two homes so that your child can see that she is not the only one whose parents live apart (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014).
4. Help your child have opportunities to maintain his connections with friends and extended family members, such as aunts or uncles (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014). Help your child express his emotions about the changing family dynamics.
5. Keep other important adults in your child’s life (child care providers, teachers, coaches) informed about what is happening so that they can watch for any warning signs that your child is having trouble coping (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014).

6. Take care of yourself. You may feel like this is the last thing that you have time for or want to do, but it is extremely important. Parents need to look after their own health and set aside time to care for themselves so that they can cope with their own emotions and stressors. Be sure to get enough sleep, eat healthy foods, exercise, and reach out to people in your social support network, etc... By taking care of yourself, you are in a better position to take care of your child.

Strengthen Parent-Child Relationships

The quality of the parent-child relationship can help protect your child from the damaging effects of divorce and promote resilience in your child. A strong parent-child relationship results in fewer negative outcomes of divorce, including mental health problems and problems in social functioning (Clark, 2014).

A strong parent-child relationship is characterized by love, warmth, supportiveness, positive communication, and high levels of positive interaction. Developing strong parent-child relationships depends on communicating effectively and often with children. It also depends on spending quality time with children.

Eliminate Hostile Conflict

Ongoing inter-parental conflict is one of the most damaging factors of divorce on children (Clark, 2014). Frequent, intense hostility between parents, especially in front of the children, is very damaging and must be prevented (Clark, 2014). Parents must learn to control verbal and physical conflict. Exposure to violence and abusive behavior are toxic to children. High-intensity conflict is linked to the development of insecure and disorganized attachment styles in children, which leads to a greater risk for developing mental health challenges. When parents are feeling complex and intense emotion, hostility, and, loss, both parents may have difficulty focusing on the child's priorities, which can be damaging for a child (Clark, 2014).

Develop a respectful, businesslike relationship with the other parent, with clear boundaries and "ground rules" for interacting (Clark, 2014). You likely have a common commitment to your child's best interests and well-being. Eliminating hostile conflict helps protect your child against some of the damaging effects of divorce.

Mediation is an effective way to resolve conflict (Clark, 2014). Parents who seek mediation are often better able to co-parent, resolve conflict and stay more involved compared with parents who seek litigation alone (Clark, 2014). Legal and mental health professionals can help draft a parenting plan, if parents are experiencing high levels of conflict (Clark, 2014). This parenting plan can decrease interaction time between parents while allowing the child's developmental needs to be met (Clark, 2014).

Following are six things you can do to decrease conflict with the other parent, and in turn help your child through the divorce process. These six things may be difficult to implement, but are very vital to your child's well-being.

1. Do not catch your child in the middle of you and the other parent. Communicate directly with the other parent, and do not expect children to act as messengers or spies. They should not be expected to give messages from you to the other parent or give you information about the other parent's life.

2. Do not undermine the other parent. Do not speak negatively about the other parent to your child or in front of your child. If you are struggling with your own feelings and emotions, find a supportive friend or counselor to talk with.

3. Be polite when your child is picked up or dropped off. If you are loving and reassuring to your child at this time, this may help him cope with the transition.

4. Let your child talk to the other parent whenever she needs to. Also, try to show interest in the time she spends with the other parent. Do not suggest with words or actions that your child is disloyal if she enjoys the time away from you.

5. Respect appropriate limits set by the other parent. Do not undermine the other parent's authority or reverse any decision he or she has made. Discuss rules and discipline with the other parent so that you are as consistent as possible in both households.

6. Share your child's important medical and school information with the other parent. If possible, it may be a good idea to attend meetings and appointments together so that you can both be informed (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2014).

These are three tremendously important ways that you can help your child be more resilient through the divorce process. If your child is experiencing more serious distress, your child may need additional help from a counselor, psychologist, social worker, or doctor.

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