Talking to Children About Divorce

What is Divorce to a Child?
The dictionary defines divorce as the “legal dissolution of a marriage” that results in a complete or radical separation of closely connected people or things. This definition barely describes the change, emotion or stress often linked with the divorce experience. For children, divorce is not just certain family members moving to different places, but a period of time that is filled with strong emotions and major family changes.

Divorce launches children into the experience of living in two worlds, the two worlds of parents who may have differing values, interests or ways of living. As much as possible, parents who can sustain some consistency (similar rules or expectations, etc.) for their children in between these worlds help their children adapt.

Yet divorce still means change for children, and change is difficult for most people. When seeking to understand a child’s experience of divorce, adults must think somewhat differently and be aware of the topic from a child’s point of view rather than an adult’s perspective.

In divorce, adults typically deal with logistical or external decisions and issues, while children often face uncertainty, internal feelings and changes that result from the divorce process.

Some of the external issues that adults must face in the process of divorce are:

• Deciding where to live as a family member
• Planning what school children will attend
• Managing court processes and decisions
• Dividing up household property
• Providing for household expenses
• Giving sufficient and needed daily care to children

In contrast, children may face more internal issues that include the following:

• Grieving about the physical absence of a parent
• Coping with the stress of multiple changes at once
• Seeking some sort of control over the situation
• Accepting reassurance that they are not at fault for the divorce

Adults must understand that the issues occupying them may be quite different than the concerns of their children, and children of all ages need to hear that they still are loved despite the changes in family life.
Talking to Young Children (ages 4 to 8)

When talking to young children from ages 4 to 8, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Young Children
- Expressing fears of being alone (separation anxiety), unloved, abandoned
- Clinging, need for parental attention
- Tantrums, crying or irritability

Children’s Responses to Divorce

A primary reason that children may struggle with the divorce process is that divorce introduces a set of changes that often are rapid, unexpected and unpredictable. It is not an “ordinary” process for children, and they often do not understand all that is occurring. For any person, such a situation can be stressful, but it can be more so for children who have less experience and fewer coping skills or resources than adults.

Children might do one or more of the following things when responding to divorce:
- Act out or have more behavior problems. Parents may find children not listening to them, hitting or biting, being mean to younger siblings, talking back or being more disobedient than usual. These behaviors are often symptoms of frustration or anger about the situation.
- Hold their feelings inside and avoid communication. Children may push their feelings inward and act depressed. They may hope to avoid pain by not communicating about their feelings or withdrawing from others, including parents.
- Blame themselves or feel guilty about the divorce. Children are prone to assume responsibility for what is not their problem when divorce occurs, and so they may start blaming themselves.
- Anger or aggression toward toys, custodial parent (often mother), siblings or friends
- Negative behaviors or acting out (hitting, yelling, threatening, misbehaving)
- Acting out the situation in play (parents playing house, lonely child, etc.)
- Blaming themselves for the divorce, parent leaving
- Fantasies about parents staying together, idealizing the absent parent

Talking to Adolescents

When talking to adolescent children from ages 9 to 13, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Adolescents
- Feeling conflicted about loyalty to each parent, may feel “stuck in the middle”
- Anger or aggression about the divorce, toward parents or siblings
- Feelings of being hurt, lied to or betrayed
- Sense of shame about family situation, concern about what peers think
- Confusion about who they are and where they fit in
- Manipulative behavior, playing “games” with parents
- Feelings of isolation or feeling alone
- Feelings of depression
- Feelings of powerlessness

Talking to Teens

When talking to teens from ages 14 to 18, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Teens
- Feelings of anger about the divorce, toward parents or in feeling powerless
- May “grow up” more quickly, distance themselves emotionally from parents, become more independent
- Conflicted about loyalty to each parent
- Negative coping patterns may involve emotional withdrawal, depression or isolation, or involvement in inappropriate activities (drugs, etc.) to “escape”
- Sense of a loss of “home” or family identity
- Uncertainty about their own personal relationships, discomfort with parents’ new romantic relationships
- Increased sense of responsibility for other family members

What to Say and Do
- Help children express and cope with grief, anger or feelings of concern. For children to sense and feel loss or anger is natural. Acknowledge the reality of their feelings and help them respond in appropriate ways.
- Avoid placing the child in the middle of conflicts. Do not make children an “ally” against the other parent and don’t use them to convey messages.
- Speak about positive aspects of the other parent. Avoid open criticism and help the child maintain a positive relationship with the other parent.
- Spend time individually with children to strengthen your relationships. Watch movies together, spend time talking, playing games at home or go out to eat. Find opportunities for more connections and conversations.
- Keep your child’s activities normal by involving him or her as much as possible in regular opportunities, such as healthy activities, youth groups, sports, etc. Help them see that the focus of life does not need to be strictly on divorce all the time.
- Allow children to call the other parent, exchange messages or have a picture of the other parent with them (or in their room). This helps adolescents know they want them to have a good relationship with the other parent.

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Conclusion

The bottom line is that divorce is not an easy experience. It can be hard and challenging for children at any age. However, if parents commit to working through the process in a reasonable way, minimizing conflict and focusing on the needs of their children, reducing negative effects and helping children remain healthy is possible. No family is immune from the prospect of divorce.

For families that experience this change, talking about the experience and sharing feelings in an atmosphere of safety is one of the most important things for children. Some suggestions offered in this publication may apply to children of all ages. Parents and other adults should understand that children may experience divorce in different ways than adults involved in the process, and being responsive to their needs requires patience, awareness and understanding.

References


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