

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE

The Difficulty of Divorce

There is a 50/50 chance that couples who marry today will divorce, and almost half of all children now growing up in the United States have seen or will see their parents' marriage end. Divorce is one of the most difficult experiences many people will ever face. A divorce is something that many adults and almost all children do not want to happen, and it can take a very long time to accept. Even people who want to divorce often find that they have mixed emotions. There are marriages that are empty, conflict-ridden, or even abusive, and ending the relationship is the right decision. But even when it is the right decision, divorce is only the better choice between two painful alternatives.

Divorce is extremely stressful, but research shows that most people, including most children, cope successfully with the stress. Newspapers, magazines, and television shows constantly emphasize the irreversible damage of divorce, especially for children. This makes for dramatic headlines, but it does not reflect the reality of scientific evidence. Research studies consistently indicate that divorce has few lasting effects on children's mental health or performance in school. In fact, what is most notable about children of divorce is their resilience, their successful coping despite life's difficulties. Divorce poses many challenges to children; and, after a period of readjustment, most children succeed in facing the challenges. Divorce is almost always painful; but, if it is handled properly, it does not lead to irreversible damage.

Thus, neither one of the common story lines on divorce is accurate. For children and for parents, divorce is neither easy nor impossible. It takes time for parents and children to re-establish family life after divorce - at least a year or two, perhaps longer. It also takes hard work. Parents may have to work harder at parenting, at a job, or at getting along with each other; and children also may have to work harder in order to help their family. Still, the work can pay off; and for most families divorce remains a painful memory, but a memory that is not so painful that they cannot get on with their lives.

Explaining Divorce to a Child

The meaning of divorce is quite different for children of different ages, and explanations need to be tailored accordingly. Infants and toddlers obviously don't understand what divorce means, but they do understand if their daily routine changes. Security and consistency are what is most important to them. Preschoolers and young school-age children may understand the word "divorce," but they, too, are more interested in practical things. Some of the questions they want answered are:

Where will I stay?

Am I going to be left alone?

Where will my stuff be?

When will I see Mom?

When will I see Dad?

Do you still love me?

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or goals might involve:

- A way of acting: like being consistent
- A way of feeling: like balancing affection properly
- A way of thinking: like cooperating for the child's benefit
- A way of coping: like maintaining positive relationships

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives, are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

HOW TO GET HELP: If you are looking for help, either for yourself or someone else, you may be tempted to call someone who advertises in a local publication or who comes up from a search of the Internet. You may, or may not, find a competent therapist in this manner. It is wise to check on the credentials of a psychotherapist. It is expected that competent therapists hold advanced academic degrees and training. They should be listed as members of professional organizations, such as the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies or the American Psychological Association. Of course, they should be licensed to practice in your state. You can find competent specialists who are affiliated with local universities or mental health facilities or who are listed on the websites of professional organizations. You may, of course, visit our website (www.abct.org) and click on "Find a CBT Therapist."

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.

School-age children want to know more about the reasons for divorce; and, as time passes they may ask tricky questions that need to be answered honestly. Eight- to twelve-year-olds also need answers to their many practical questions about their daily routines, and they can use a parent's help with the tricky question of what to tell their friends. Adolescents want the most information, and they should get an honest but limited explanation. It is appropriate for teenagers to know why their parents split up, but it is inappropriate for them to know all the details of their parents' marriage. They are children, not friends.

In thinking about what to tell children of different ages about divorce, it may be helpful to think about what is appropriate to tell a child of the same age about "where babies come from." Children of any age deserve honest information about both topics, but they don't need to know every detail. Of course, repeated and increasingly sophisticated explanations are needed as children grow older; but, just as with what they learn about sex, much of what children believe about divorce will differ from what they are told. Children's beliefs will be closer to parents' explanations when parents offer information designed to help the children, not to unburden themselves or to blame their spouses.

A few tips may help in making sure that explanations meet the needs of children, not parents.

- Always reassure children that they are loved.
- Always try to be neutral (or positive, if possible) about children's relationship with the other parent.
- Always think about the conversation in advance, and maybe even try it out on a friend first.
- Most important of all, put yourself in your children's shoes.
- What would you want to know, and how would you want to be told?

Legalities and the Children

Divorced families are still families, and a major task that parents face is renegotiating their family relationships with their children and with each other. Deciding how each parent will spend time with the children is one of the biggest issues that must be negotiated legally. This tricky question may be tied to other things, such as who will move from the family residence, the question of financial support, or the desire of a parent to relocate to a different part of the country.

There is no one type of legal or physical custody arrangement that has been found to be best for children. Many people feel that the best arrangement is joint legal and physical custody, in which parents share decisions and spend approximately equal time with their children. Others argue that sole custody is best, insisting that children need one home and one parent in charge. Still other people want different arrangements, such as having children live primarily with the parent of the same sex.

Research does not strongly support any one of these alternatives over the others. What works best depends on a family's circumstances, not on some abstract legal term. When determining what will work best, some principles to consider should be:

- Keep conflict to a minimum
- Maximize quality contact
- Maintain consistency
- Keep it simple

Fighting With a Former Spouse

Research makes it very clear that the more parents fight with each other — before, during, and after a divorce — the more psychological problems their children experience. This is especially true when children witness or overhear the conflict, or when they are put in the middle of a dispute. Even very young children feel tension, torn loyalties, and mixed messages when their parents are struggling. Obviously, disagreements are expected between divorced partners. Different philosophies about raising children can become difficult to manage, and old hurts and new jealousies can create many reasons for anger and pain.

Getting angry often feels good to a parent (at least for a while), but children benefit if their parents cooperate. This makes for one of the trickiest emotional balancing acts in divorce. The solution usually is not for former spouses to be “friends.” In fact, it often works better if parents have a polite, businesslike approach to working together in rearing their children. The point is that although some fighting may be good for a parent, it is not good for children. Therefore, a simple and very important rule about fighting is: Keep children out of the middle.

Children’s Relationships With Both Parents

As a rule, more contact with both parents is better for children, but only if the parents’ conflict is contained. If fighting is uncontrolled, children may do better to see one parent less — and be exposed to less fighting as a result. More contact with each parent may mean sharing time with the children equally; but that arrangement is the exception, not the rule. Many divorced families maximize contact between children and both parents by keeping a stable routine during the school week but then coming up with creative options for using weekends, school vacations, and summer holidays. Other parents recognize that major changes are likely to take place as children grow old, and this helps them to accept less attractive options for the time being.

Consistency in schedules and rules makes life less stressful for everyone. Once parents agree on a plan for spending time with their children, they do well to stick to it religiously. Children want to know where they are going to be at what times, and, while a change or delay may seem small to a parent, it can be a big deal to a child. Everyone needs some flexibility, of course; but flexibility works best if it follows long after a consistent routine has been established.

A few rules on parenting alone can be useful to keep in mind. Children need love, but they also need discipline. Each household needs a few clear and reasonable rules about such things as bedtimes, responsibilities, and appropriate behavior; and parents should expect these rules to be followed. No means no, and parents make a big mistake if they let their guilt turn no into “maybe not.” Of course, a positive focus is the best way to discipline. Praising children for doing things right works much better than criticizing children for doing things wrong.

Finally, get children involved in taking responsibility for their actions and duties. Call a family meeting, explain the problem, and ask children what they (realistically) think is an appropriate solution. Children can discipline themselves pretty strictly if given the chance, and it is hard for them to argue against rules that they set for themselves.

Trouble Spots

Some children develop psychological problems following their parents' divorce, and many more have trouble making an adjustment. Crying, worrying, and constant questions about the divorce are obvious signs; but increased aggression, disturbed sleep, spending more time alone, or lower grades also can be signals. Parents often have a hard time being objective in evaluating how their children are coping, and obtaining an outside opinion can be a great help. Child-care providers or teachers, for example, see many children and can give valuable feedback.

While all children are upset to some degree when their parents first separate, if the children have ongoing problems, their upset is frequently tied to continuing problems in family relationships. The parents may still be fighting; one parent may be inconsistent in spending time with the children; or the schedule may be too complicated. Alternatively, one or both parents may be disciplining the children ineffectively; the children may not be getting enough affection; or parents may be putting too many emotional and practical burdens on the children. Because of these possibilities, three good things that divorced parents always can do for their children are:

- To work on coping better themselves
- To work on maintaining a positive relationship with their children
- To work on finding a way to stop fighting with each other.

Ways to Get Help

Friends and relatives flock to aid a family during a crisis, but many people do not know how to react to a divorce. As a result, instead of helping out, many potential supporters move away from the divorced family. For this reason, parents and children often have to ask for help in coping with divorce, and this is the time to ask. In addition to seeking the help of friends and relatives, many parents also find self-help books useful at this time. Parents should call on professional helpers, too, if there seems to be a need. Lawyers can give advice and negotiate agreements for parents, or parents may want to seek out a divorce mediator.

Divorce mediators usually are either mental health professionals or lawyers, but they specialize in helping divorcing or divorced parents negotiate their own legal agreements in a more cooperative manner. Therapists who are familiar with divorce and comfortable in offering direction also can provide objective opinions, support, and advice to individuals, to parents and children, or to former spouses.

Finally, groups for parents or children may be especially beneficial in divorce. Self-help groups for parents are available in most communities, and more schools are offering groups for children of divorce.

For more information or to find a therapist:

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