

Family Assets ... Building Blocks for Life



Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet
Family and Consumer Sciences

Dealing with Change: Divorce and Children

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In the past 30 years, there has been a significant decline in the proportion of two-parent families in first marriages and a complementary increase in the number of single-parent households and step-families. These changes are the result of a rapid rise in the divorce rate that began during the 1960s (Simons, 1996) and also, to a less extent, of increase in births to single mothers. Although there has been a modest decrease in the divorce rate since the late 1970s, almost one half of marriages end in divorce in the United States, and one million children experience their parents' divorce each year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). It is projected between 50% and 60% of children born in the 1990s will live, at some point, in single-parent families, typically headed by mothers (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

Divorce is one of life's most stressful experiences. When people get a divorce, it requires a period of mourning; sometimes for a year or more, before they feel better. Some of the reasons the process is so painful are because it involves money, being alone, and sometimes children, property settlements, and an ex-partner's new romance.

When children are involved, the parents are more likely to have a continued relationship. Divorce may increase children's risk for a number of problems; however, not all children who experience divorce have problems. A great deal of variability is present among children of divorce, with some experiencing problems, and others adjusting well or even showing improvements in behavior (Amato, 1993).

What Are the Possible Problems?

Children from divorced families frequently have academic problems and are likely to be aggressive, be in

trouble with school authorities or the police, have low self-esteem, and feel depressed. They are also more likely to have difficulty getting along with siblings, peers, and their parents, engage in delinquent activities, be involved in early sexual activity, and experiment with illegal drugs.

As the children enter adolescence and young adulthood, they are more likely to have some difficulty forming intimate relationships and establishing independence from their family.

Is Divorce Different for Boys and Girls?

Early research indicates that boys might experience more difficulties than girls. On the positive side, some girls from divorced, mother-headed households emerge as exceptionally resilient young women. It seems that some young women thrive on the increased responsibilities and challenges and develop warm and deeply affectionate ties with their mothers. Similar findings do not occur for boys.

Behavior Changes to Expect

Each child will react somewhat differently to divorce or separation. Very little is known about the effects of divorce on children younger than 2 years of age. Very young children do not necessarily suffer just because a divorce has occurred. Both parents can stay actively involved in child rearing, or only one parent can maintain a strong, healthy relationship with the child.

Preschoolers tend to be fearful and sometimes resort to immature or aggressive behavior. They might:

- return to want a security blanket or old toys
- have lapses in toilet training
- be confused about what is happening

- often deny anything has changed
- become less imaginative and uncooperative in play
- spend more time playing by themselves
- show more anxiety, depression, anger, and apathy
- spend more time seeking attention
- resist adult suggestions and commands

These behaviors may rarely last more than a few weeks, and most will adjust to the situation. There does not seem to be any effects on their academic achievement.

Children 6-8 years tend to have some understanding of what divorce means and are able to deal with what is happening. Many:

- experience deep grief over the breakup of the family
- are fearful
- yearn for the absent parent
- feel conflicts in loyalty to one parent or the other

If the mother has custody, boys tend to behave aggressively toward her.

Older children 9-12 years try to understand the divorce and keep their behavior and emotions under control. They may have feelings of loss, embarrassment, resentment, and anger toward one parent or both.

These children actively involve themselves in play and activities to help manage their feelings. They may make up games and act out make-believe dramas concerning the divorce to help them cope with the situation. Some may struggle and be drawn to choosing one parent over the other.

Adolescents understand the divorce situation better, and they experience some difficulties adjusting. They feel they are being pushed into adulthood with little time for transition from childhood and may feel:

- a loss of support in handling emerging sexual and aggressive feelings
- they are in competition with parents when going on dates

Some may have doubts about their own ability to get married or stay married. Many seem to mature more quickly following a divorce, take increased responsibilities in the home, show an increased appreciation of money, and gain insights into their own relationships with others. Some may also be drawn into the role of taking care of the parent and fail to develop relations with peers.

What can parents do?

Effective discipline requires providing the nurturing and love that children need, while setting firm limits on aggressiveness and other inappropriate behaviors. Minimizing the conflict and hostility between parents can contribute to positive outcomes. Agreement between the parents on discipline and child rearing, and love and approval from both parents, will contribute to the child's sense of well-being and self-worth. Parents need to inform their child's caregiver and/or teachers who may be the first to notice a change in behavior, grades, and friends. It may also be helpful to ask for assistance from qualified professionals and support groups for both the parents and children.

Sources

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