

Psych Savvy

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

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Children and Divorce
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September, 2001

Overview

Each year about one million children experience a family divorce. Over half of these children have no contact with their fathers after divorce. Many children do, however, have regular contact with the noncustodial parent. These visits are very important to a positive divorce adjustment. Divorce is distressing for children, but most children adjust to this change in their family within two years. Divorce is increasingly being seen as a difficult experience on the path to growth, rather than a tragedy from which no one recovers.

Adjustment to Divorce

The effects of divorce vary from one family to the next. Anger, depression, social withdrawal, guilt, or lower school performance are typical initial responses of children. Some children begin to accept this change in their family within weeks or months following the divorce, while others experience years of anxiety, sadness, or acting out. Many factors may influence a child's adjustment to divorce. These include: the child's age, relationship with each parent, prior adjustment, and ability level. Other factors such as geographic moves due to the divorce and loss of contact with grandparents or other relatives may hinder the divorce adjustment.

A younger child's adjustment to divorce is closely related to the parents' adjustment. For teens, divorce may make these naturally turbulent years even more difficult. Boys are usually more negatively affected than girls. Psychological research shows that boys in single-parent homes may develop relationships with their mothers that are non-compliant in nature.

Often the first year after a divorce is filled with turmoil, new adjustments, and upsets for everyone involved. Mothers may begin working, or working longer hours. Children often experience this as a loss and need plenty of support during this time. Social supports can help facilitate good divorce adjustment. Relationships with friends, teachers, school psychologists, school counselors, and organizations such as Boys and Girls Club or Scouts can be very important.

What Can Teachers Do?

- ***Be sensitive to students' emotional status:*** If a student seems distressed over a period of weeks, or if school performance declines, a referral to the school psychologist or school counselor may be helpful.
- ***Listen to students' concerns:*** Often children will confide in a trusted adult when a divorce occurs in the family. It is helpful to listen to students' concerns and to let them know you are available.

- **Encourage support groups:** Divorce adjustment groups can be helpful for students. Talk to your school psychologist or school counselor about starting a group if one is not currently available at your school.

What Can Parents Do?

- **Reassure and support:** Reassure your child that both parents still love him/her and the he/she did not cause the divorce.
- **Be available to your child:** Try not to decrease the amount of time you are spending with him/her.
- **Do not expect your child to share all of his/her feelings about divorce:** Your child may be apprehensive about letting you know that he/she misses the absent parent.
- **Provide as much consistency as possible:** Do maintain continuity in the child's activities and relationships.
- **Plan enjoyable outings.**
- **Do not criticize** the absent parent, or share adult concerns about finances or conflict areas. Get adult support if you need it. A counselor or family psychologist can help you adjust, handle strong emotions, and evaluate difficult decisions.

Remarriage and Step-families

Not long after the turmoil of divorce begins to subside, one or both parents may find new life partners and another difficult adjustment for the child begins. A child's adjustment is easier in a "simple step-family" in which the new parent does not have any children. Adjustment will be slower and more difficult in a "complex or blended step-family" in which other children are brought into the relationship by the new parent. Research indicates that adjustment problems are even more evident in children when a new baby is introduced into the step-family.

Many step-families make great efforts to help facilitate good adjustment for everyone involved. Boys who gain step-parents have shown particular improvement in adjustment. The first year or two in a step-family may be filled with discomfort, feelings of being "left-out", and conflicting loyalties. Adjustment in a step-family typically takes up to five years. Harmonious, supportive relationships grow as the family works together to reduce conflict and improve parenting skills.

Adapted from:

Eckman, L. K. (1998). "Divorce and Children: A Handout for Parents and Teachers". *Helping Children at Home and at School: Handouts from Your School Psychologist*. National Association of School Psychologists.

Children's Books About Divorce:

Brown, L. & Brown, M. (1986). *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families*. Little, Brown.

Lansky, V. (2000). *Don't Full Apart on Saturdays!: The Children's Divorce-Survival Book*. Landmark Editions.

Prokop, M. (2000). *Kids' Divorce Workbook: Revised Edition*. Alegria House.

Winthrop, E. (1998). *As the Crow Flies*. Clarion Books.