

Children and Divorce

- One out of every two marriages ends in divorce and many divorcing families include children.
- Parents who are getting a divorce are frequently worried about the effect the divorce will have on their children.
- During this difficult period, parents may be preoccupied with their own problems, but continue to be the most important people in their children's lives.

While parents may be devastated or relieved by the divorce, children are invariably frightened and confused by their security. Divorce can be misinterpreted by children unless parents tell them what is happening, how they are involved and not involved and what will happen to them.

Some parents feel so hurt or overwhelmed by the divorce that they may turn to the child for comfort or direction, which can be confusing for children.

Children often believe they have caused the conflict between their mother and father. Many children assume the responsibility for bringing their parents back together, sometimes by sacrificing themselves.

With care and attention, however, a family's strengths can be mobilized during a divorce and children can be helped to deal constructively with the resolution of parental conflict.

Talk About It

Talking to children about divorce is difficult. The following tips can help both the child and parents with the challenge and stress of these conversations:

- Do not keep the divorce a secret or wait until the last minute.
- Take time to tell your child together.
- Keep things simple and straight-forward. Use age appropriate language.
- Tell them the divorce is not their fault.
- Admit that this will be sad and upsetting for everyone.
- Reassure your child that you both still love them and will always be their parents.
- Do not discuss each other's faults or problems with the child.

Signs of Distress in Children

Parents should be alert to signs of distress in their children.

- Young children may react to divorce by becoming more aggressive and uncooperative or withdrawing.
- Older children may feel deep sadness and loss. Their schoolwork may suffer and behavior problems are common.
- As teenagers and adults, children of divorce can have trouble with their own relationships and experience problems with self-esteem.

Children will do best if they know that their mother and father will still be their parents and remain involved with them even though the marriage is ending and parents won't live together.

Long custody disputes or pressure on a child to "choose" sides can be particularly harmful for the youngster and can add to the damage of the divorce. Research shows that children do best when parents can cooperate on behalf of the child.

Parents' ongoing commitment to the child's well-being is vital.

- If a child shows signs of distress, the family doctor or pediatrician can refer the parents to a child and adolescent psychiatrist for evaluation and treatment.
- A child and adolescent psychiatrist can meet with the parents to help them learn how to make the strain of the divorce easier on the entire family.
- Psychotherapy for children of a divorce, and the divorcing parents, can be helpful.

Resource: www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/divorce.htm

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