

Divorce

Divorce is one of the human situations that is invariably painful. To tell parents they can prevent hurt to their children is as mistaken as telling a child that a shot won't hurt.

What can be helped is unnecessary pain and suffering. Most of the mechanisms that promote relief of worry and other bad feelings also help prevent long range problems, except for one thing - denial. Pain can be handled by denying or pretending it isn't there, but this gives only short-term relief and makes things worse in the long run.

Basically, children need information, security and a chance to express their feelings. Given these things and provided the children had no special vulnerabilities prior to the breakup, then their own healing abilities can master the problem.

Children less than three need more attention to their security than anything else. They can't really be told, so have to be shown, that they will still be fed, cared for, loved, and not forgotten. They need to be shown that these things are still available even though they are feeling that something is different, and something is gone, even though they can tell that the adults who are still there are moody, cranky, and worried due to their own deprivations, and even though they themselves are more fussy and frightened and demanding. Physical illness and developmental regression are common responses in this age group, but will usually be temporary if security needs are met.

Children three to six need not only security but also information. Their views of themselves and the world, and their sense of worth, are being developed, so they can easily get wrong ideas. Almost all children feel they somehow caused the breakup by being naughty or wishing someone would leave. Many children feel they have to take the place of the lost parent or are responsible for bringing the parents back together. They need to be told the true reason for the breakup (but not the sordid details) and the best guess as to what is going to happen to them. They need to be encouraged to continue to learn new ways of doing for themselves so they don't become helpless and/or overly attached to the home parent. Power struggles and naughty rebellion are normal aspects of these ages which can be magnified by a breakup and which try the patience of the already burdened parent. Time out for the parent may be crucial to prevent the need for further separation and abandonment.

Young school-agers need security and information but also a chance to express their feelings. They feel powerless, ashamed, angry, and sad. It isn't good to squelch all these unpleasant feelings even though grownups don't like to be reminded of the pain. The task is to help the child find socially acceptable ways to work these out. Play, sports, writing stories, drawing pictures, or even a free period to say "whatever" without repercussions are some of the things parents can encourage. Also, attachments to friends are important in many ways, including a chance to talk things over.

Children, especially young school-agers, often get upset before or after a visit to the other parent. There are many reasons for this, mostly having to do with divided loyalties. Prior to mid adolescence, children should not be given the choice of which parent to live with, or whether to visit. It has to be assumed that the child needs some time with both parents unless there is some serious danger involved.

Preteens are very aware of status and competence, often are materialistic, and can be very critical. They need opportunities to master new skills and perfect old skills. They need to be reminded that they can succeed by their own efforts and that what they want is not necessarily what they need, and that if their wishes were to be indulged it would not be good for their growth. They are learning that adults aren't perfect and sometimes will focus this awareness into blaming everything on the broken home.

Adolescents often have strong needs to be "themselves" and to act against the standards of the house. They need to test how far they can go, and they need to find out for themselves what the world is all about. Their natural rebellion is often heightened when there is a divorce, or when they previously went through a divorce in childhood. If there is only one parent to ride herd on the anger and impulsiveness of a teenager, it can be an "out of control" situation. "Firm limits" could be required, which might involve getting more adults into the picture. It is relatively common for an adolescent to change homes, to live with the other parent. This can be a healthy move for all concerned and needn't be dreaded as indicating anyone's failure.

Parents have needs also, needs which are heightened by the stress of dissolution and single parenting. Attention to one's own health and recreation not only improves time spent with the child but also gives a good message of self-responsibility and capacity for separateness.

Helping your child and yourself overcome the pain and grief of divorce by attention to individual needs at various stages of development will usually prevent the necessity of professional services. Unless there are very serious or prolonged symptoms of distress, doctors usually recommend that you first get reliable information about adjusting to divorce and then give your informed parenting power a chance to work.

Information for parents that we recommend is contained in *The Parents Book About Divorce* by Richard Gardner, M.D., published by Bantam Books, ISBN 0-553-25744-7. Information for children is contained in *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce* by the same author and publisher, ISBN 0-553-25310-7. It is written on an easy fourth grade reading level. We found it helpful if read to younger children by parents, and it can be used to foster communications with older children if they read aloud to the parents.

Most parents want to know what problems they should have checked by a professional. Some symptoms are inevitable and usually transient, and it's normal that most parents are themselves uncertain whether they are managing the situation well. If the following signs of depression are present, a visit to psychiatry is appropriate: marked school failure or avoidance, sleep disturbances, frequent crying, marked behavior changes, self-destructive wishes or acts, or avoidance of fun and friends. Also, if less severe symptoms persist for more than a year, or if there was violence, drug abuse, or marked family instability prior to the divorce, or if the child prior to the separation had serious learning or behavior problems, then it would be wise to obtain an evaluation as to how well the child is coping.

Studies indicate that one of the biggest factors in helping a child to overcome the insult of a broken family and to move on to a healthy adjustment is the example set by parents who are able to establish a comfortable and stable new life. Parents can be helped to achieve this by attending classes, workshops, and support groups in the community, or they can refer themselves to similar programs in the Department of Psychiatry (973-5300) or in Health Education (784-5775).

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