

Helping Children to Cope With Divorce

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Most of us would agree that divorce has the potential for tremendous impact upon children. Even in the best of circumstances, children may be devastated to learn that their mother and father will no longer be living together. For a child, this means he will never live with both of his parents again. Time with each parent may be shared, and it may even be equal. However, the family unit, as it was previously defined, will forever be changed.

What will the impact be upon the child? This depends upon many factors. Among these are: the way the parents relate to one another as they negotiate their separation/divorce, the visitation/custody arrangements, and the extent to which the children are placed “in the middle” of parental disagreements.

If the parents are able to be calm and civil with one another, it will usually lessen the trauma for the children. If the parents are provocative and adversarial it may increase the trauma for the children.

By legal definition, divorce is an adversarial relationship: “have your attorney talk to my attorney” or “we’ll see you in court.” Yet there are alternatives to this confrontational system.

One recommended alternative is mediation. During the process of mediation the parties work out mutually agreeable arrangements with the assistance of a certified mediator. Some mediators are attorneys; but they do not legally represent either party. Other mediators have backgrounds in counseling. Regardless of their professional affiliation, the mediator’s role is to help the parties come to a mutually satisfying agreement. Once this has been reached it is recommended that both parties have an attorneys of their choice review the agreement before it is signed.

Visitation/custody arrangements are another factor that may influence the way in which separation/divorce affects children. It is fairly common for parents to have joint *legal* custody. It has also become more common to see parents who share relatively equal time with the children. Children who feel they do not see one of their parents enough or feel that one parent is limiting their time with the other parent may be more likely to act out.

It is sometimes more helpful to use the term “parenting arrangements” instead of “custody” or “visitation”. Parents essentially tell the child that they will spend time with both mother and father according to whatever arrangements are made. It is important to tell the child exactly what the arrangements will be so that he will know when to expect to see each parent. It is equally important for parents to abide by these arrangements in order to provide consistency and structure in the child’s life.

Placing children “in the middle” of parental conflicts occurs in many ways. The unfortunate truth is that parents are rarely aware that they are doing this. There are many ways this occurs. Sometimes one parent says something in the child’s presence or directly to the child about the other parent. One parent should never speak negatively about the other parent. This will often cause harm to the child’s emotional well-being.

Another way in which the child may be caught in the middle is for one parent to ask the child to tell the other parent something. For example, mom says: “*Tell your*

father I have to work late and I will pick you up at six instead of five this evening."

When the child does what they are told, the dad's response is: *"What is she trying to do violate the court order! Besides I have plans and need to leave here by five."* The child may feel it is her fault and take the blame for dad's anger or may rebel against the parents for being placed in the middle of their conflicts. These feelings are sometimes turned inward, create emotional damage or lead to depression.

The same dynamic occurs when one parent gives the child something to deliver to the other parent. This literally places the child "in the middle". Parents should NEVER give the child anything to be delivered to the other parent. Parents have the responsibility to deal directly with one another or through an adult representative (attorney, mediator, friend) and NOT through the children.

A common theme for children, during and after the divorce process, is the hope that their parents will reunite. They sometimes cling to this fantasy for many years. It is helpful to allow children to express their feelings even if you disagree with them. How should you respond in this situation, when they express hope of a reunion between their parents? Something like this would be helpful: *"It must be difficult for you to see that mommy and daddy are not living together. It sounds like you wish we could be together as a family again."* This acknowledges their feelings and lets them know they are entitled to share their feelings in an appropriate manner. If you are certain there is no chance of reunion you can add that you do not believe this will ever happen.

Conversely, if you are working towards possible reconciliation you can tell the child *"We just have to wait and see if it works out"* while acknowledging how difficult the uncertainty can be. Remember to be careful to avoid expressing your feelings about the other parent or speaking for the other parent.

Some children may feel they are responsible for the separation/divorce. They may have misinterpreted things they overheard the parents talking about. They may feel that if they had behaved better their parents may not have separated. It is important to reassure them that the reasons for divorce are the mom and dad's issues between one another and not due to the child.

Parents can minimize the trauma of divorce upon their children by working in the best interest of the child despite the parental issues. Keep the child out of the middle, and make decisions based upon the child's needs versus the parents' needs.