

What Happens To Children In Early Divorce

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

No doubt about it; divorce hurts. Everyone concerned usually experiences distress with divorce. Emotional, financial, spiritual, and even physical distress is common for both divorcing parties. The children usually experience fear and confusion, even when they are tired of the parents fighting all the time.

For the kids, it is like their lives have been thrown into the air and they do not know how it is all going to land. Children will have a lot of questions about who they will live with, whether, when, and where they will spend time with the other parent, and whether they will still have access to grandparents and other family members that are important to them. They usually know other children whose parents are divorced and have heard things about others' experiences that may cause them concern.

Parents often divorce when children are developmentally self-centered. They remember events where they got into trouble, or when parents were in conflict over them, and may believe that they are the cause of the divorce. Even if they don't believe it to be their fault, they "feel divorced" too.

While children are trying to deal with their own pain, parents may draw the children into the couple's divorce drama. The classic example of pulling the children into the middle of the divorce is when either or both parents use the kids as part of the dysfunctional power/control games they play. Examples would be to use the children as a "reason" to communicate with the other party, to withhold them from the other party, to use them for guilt trips, to grill them for information, to use them to run information between the two parents. It makes things even worse when parents ask the children to "keep secrets" from the other parent. The children are trying to sort out their own feelings and when they are put into the middle of the divorce they find themselves in a position of responsibility for the parents' feelings. Sometimes kids are even asked to provide comfort and support for the parent. It puts them in an adult role where are expected to have adult skills, which of course, they don't have. Children tend to have an inner conflict going on about loyalty without being drawn into a direct tug of war.

It is crucial that parents keep the kids out the other middle of the conflict. They don't need either parent to tell them negative things about the other parent. They don't need to know about child support payments or lack of them. What they need is two parents who are continuing to parent. They need two parents that are concerned about the children's feelings and willing to talk about those. They need two parents that are willing to answer their questions and to be patient as the children deal with the changes in their lives. Children will often move regress to previous developmental stages during a trauma like divorce. Patience, understanding, and reassurance are needed.

Discussions about divorce should match the child's developmental abilities and understanding. Both parents would be well advised to tell the children repetitively that it is not their fault, that they are still loved by both mom and dad and that they will always

be their parents. Children may express the same fears, confusions, feelings, or worries over and over. Both parents should be patient and understanding, and continue to answer the repeated questions. It is important to keep explanations simple, without blaming the other parent or the children. Keep the drama to a minimum but don't tell kids to plaster a smile on their faces. Let them have their feelings. Let them know that whatever feelings they are having (including anger) are normal and that they are going to be ok.

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