Children of Divorce: Information and Helpful Strategies

# **Purpose of this Handout**

This handout is intended to provide general information about children whose parents are divorced, separated, or currently going through a divorce or separation process. The aim is to be an aid for both parents and school-based mental health professionals in helping children cope with these circumstances.

This handout covers:

[Common Reactions in Children and Youth](#_Common_Reactions_in)

[Protective Factors](#_Protective_Factors)

[Risk Factors](#_Risk_Factors)

[What about Remarriages and Step-Parenting?](#_What_about_Remarriages)

[What can Parents do?](#_What_can_Parents)

[Some Strategies for School-Based Mental Health Professionals](#_Some_Strategies_for)

# **Common Reactions in Children and Youth**

When parents are separating, children may react in any number of different ways. The most difficult time for children (and for families in general) is the first year after the separation or divorce; generally more stability is introduced by the second year.

The following are common reactions to the divorce process that can occur from a child or youth:

* Emotional Reactions (shock, fear, anger, anxiety, shame, depression, feeling insecure, disappointment, cynicism)
* Behavioral Reactions (poor concentration, disobedience, defiance, more frequent / intense emotional outbursts, fighting or aggression toward others, social withdrawal, decreased schoolwork quality, may engage in early and promiscuous sexual activity – particularly for adolescent girls)
* Altered or challenged feelings regarding basic security and trust – child may realize for the first time that love between people is not always permanent
  + Child may become more demanding of parent(s) – this serves as “tests” of parent’s continuing love as well as commitment to continue to care for him or her (this reflects child’s fear of loss of love or abandonment)
* Idealized view of parents often shattered; Child must face the discomfort of parent fallibility
* Belief that they are the cause of the divorce – occurs more in younger children
* Fantasize about parental reconciliation

Reactions such as those above are typical, including the emotional reactions. However, sometimes challenging behavioral or emotional reactions can become very intense or fail to abate. The child may experience:

* Intense or Increased anger, sadness, or fear for long periods of time
* Regress and exhibit behaviors that are generally seen in younger children
* Have sustained problems with sleeping or eating / appetite

Signs such as these suggest that the child is having a lot of difficulty coping with the divorce situation.

# **Protective Factors**

While most children are likely to exhibit some of the reactions enumerated above, the intensity, frequency, and duration with which they do so (as well as how they adjust to the changes divorce brings) can be mitigated by a number of elements that tend to “protect” children. These are termed protective factors, and can be organized by characteristics of the child, parent, and child’s environment.

* Child Characteristics:
  + Easy Temperament (generally in a positive mood, adapts to changes well, reactions to change may be moderately intense if that, exhibits regular habits like sleeping, eating, etc., will generally approach new situations)
  + Knows and uses positive coping strategies for emotional distress
  + Shows resiliency – can bounce back from setbacks and persevere in the face of challenges
  + Emotionally secure
  + Responsible
  + Exhibited independence prior to divorce or separation
  + Higher intellectual functioning
  + Better Academic skills
* Parent Characteristics:
  + Authoritative Parenting Style (Balance high expectations with nurturing and support)
    - Warm and Nurturing
    - Responds to child’s needs
    - Communicates clearly – especially about feelings
    - Listen to children
    - Encourage Independence
    - Place limits and consequences on behavior and monitors child’s activities
    - Flexible with extenuating circumstances
    - Fair and consistent supervision and discipline
    - Allow children to express opinions
    - Encourage children to discuss options
  + Noncustodial parent has good quality of involvement with child
  + Knows and uses positive coping skills and has ability to handle stress
  + Keeps conflicts with ex-partner/ex-spouse away from children’s presence
  + Develops and maintains connections with other adults for emotional support
* Environment Characteristics:
  + Adequate available financial resources
  + Gainful Employment of parent(s) in a stable job or career
  + Good relations with siblings
  + Extended family support
  + Established connections with trusted adults outside of family (clergy, coaches, teachers, school counselors, etc.)
  + Structured extracurricular activities (youth groups, sports, music, drama, debate, scouts, etc.)
  + Links to religious community
  + Access to positive supportive peer groups – particularly for adolescents

# **Risk Factors**

While protective factors often help a child to adjust to the divorce in a more positive way, other factors put the child at risk for not being able to adjust positively or much at all. These “risk” factors can be organized similarly to the protective factors via characteristics of the child, parent, and environment.

* Child Characteristics:
  + Difficult Temperament (generally negative mood, slow to adapt or adjust, irregular seeping and eating patterns, intense reactions to things, tends to withdrawal in the presence of new situations)
  + Older age – adolescents tend to have more difficulty adjusting in general
  + Male gender – boys generally have more problems particularly if father is absent
  + African American Race / Culture – often have more problems adjusting
  + Exhibited behavioral or emotional problems prior to the divorce or separation
* Parent Characteristics:
  + Authoritarian Parenting Style – Domineering or dictatorial style; Obedience-oriented
    - Strict inflexible rules
    - Infractions always met with punishment; punishment tends to be harsh
    - Reasons for rules rarely, if ever, explained
    - High demands of children
    - Low warmth and nurturance
    - Low levels of responsiveness to needs of children
  + Permissive Parenting Style
    - Make few, if any, demands on children
    - Rarely discipline or set limits
    - Low expectations of child maturity and self-control
    - Tend to avoid confrontation
    - High responsiveness to children’s needs
    - May try to be child’s friend more than parent
  + Neglectful or Uninvolved Parenting Style
    - Few demands
    - Low Responsiveness to needs of child
    - Very little communication with child
    - May provide for basic needs, but is otherwise detached from child’s life
  + Noncustodial parent has poor quality of involvement with child
  + Parental conflict occurs in child’s presence or within line of vision or earshot
  + Tendency toward violence or abuse
  + Leans on child for emotional support or as a confidant, portrays other parent negatively to child or tries to turn child against other parent, or uses child as a go-between when communicating with other parent (these types of things are referred to as “enmeshment”)
    - Child is not psychologically ready for these burdens – can lead to lingering feelings of inadequacy and failure
  + Behavioral, learning, Mental health concerns or presence of psychopathology in parent prior to divorce
  + High levels of stress; lack of adequate coping skills
  + Isolation; lack of appropriate adult social support
* Environmental Characteristics
  + Inadequate financial resources
  + Parental job loss or instability
  + Divorce-Related transitions (moving to new home, new school, new city/state, etc.)
  + Poor quality of sibling relations
  + Few or no extended family or extra-family support

# **What about Remarriages and Step-Parenting?**

Roughly 60% of parents remarry within six years after divorce. Remarriages can introduce protective factors or risk factors.

Potential protective factors include:

* Better standard of living; More financial resources
* Better living arrangements (housing, neighborhoods, schools, etc.)
* Mutual emotional support for parents

Potential Risk Factors include:

* Disagreement about raising the children; Differing Parenting styles and expectations
* Allocation of disciplinary roles – original parent may be used to doing everything by themselves and have difficulty sharing this role
* Step-parental expectations concerning bonding with stepchildren can often be unrealistic
* High divorce rate for remarried couples (60% of remarriages end in divorce)

A critical component of successful remarriages where children are involved is developing a work relationship between children and stepparent. Ways to do this include create new family routines, traditions, and customs to help children develop experiences and memories that include the stepparent. Also understand that this may take some time.

Recognize that stepfamilies take time to gel. It is generally better for the biological or original parent to administer discipline and set expectations at first while the stepparent plays a supporting role. Over time the new couple can adapt and come to agreements about how to share the parental role.

While the children are important, also take time to nurture the marriage and take opportunities to go out alone, engage in mutual interests, and find meaningful time away from the children.

# **What can Parents Do?**

The most helpful things to do is read over the [protective factors](#_Protective_Factors) and [risk factors](#_Risk_Factors) above – particularly those dealing with parent and environmental characteristics. Determine which of these you can control, and then engage in as many protective factors as possible while not engaging in as many risk factors as possible.

To aid in this here are some DO’s and DON’TS.

DO:

* Be honest with your children about your divorce. Here is an article that may help in doing this: <http://www.divorcehq.com/divorce-telling-the-kids.shtml>
* Reassure children that divorce was not in any way their fault – this will likely have to be done numerous times, so be patient with it
* Reassure children that you still love them and will take care of them
* Provide and structure, discipline, and respect for your children
* Balance expectation and discipline with warmth, support, and being responsive to child’s needs
* Allow children to be children and experience joys of fewer responsibilities as much as possible
* Have children to stay in touch with friends from previous neighborhood or school
* Seek out positive adult relationships for your children. Examples include contacting school staff, enrolling in sports, music, or other extracurricular activities, church groups, etc
* If past activities the family once enjoyed are too expensive now, try less expensive ways (like renting from Redbox instead of going to a movie theater)
* Keep all parental conflict away from children
* Learn and apply positive coping strategies for stress and anger – reduce stress wherever and whenever possible
* Develop relationships with other adults for emotional support

DON’T:

* Be overly strict, overly permissive, or neglectful when parenting
* Engage in arguments or quarrels with ex-partner anywhere near a child
* Lean on child for emotional support, or use child as a go-between
* Communicate negative or hateful things about the other parent to the child
* Expect children to be “little adults”

While children may have to engage in a share of increased responsibility within the home due to circumstances (such as increased chores), these responsibilities need to be appropriate for the developmental level and age of the child. If they are too young, they won’t be physically or psychologically ready for the burdens, then this often leads to significate emotional and psychological distress.

# **Some Strategies for School-Based Mental Health Professionals**

Counseling is generally employed by school-based mental health professionals for children experiencing distressful reactions to their parents’ separation or divorce, and often (but not always), this tends to be in a group format. So the strategies and suggestions given below, while not delineating a specific plan, will nevertheless assume a group format. In particular, it assumes a group format for elementary-aged students; strategies can be tailored for older students or for individual situations.

Really the purposes of divorce groups tend to be at least twofold. One is to allow the members to share their stories and express and diffuse their emotional feelings about their particular situation in a therapeutic setting; the other is to help the members learn positive coping strategies for dealing with their circumstances.

A general session time-line guideline would be 20-30 minutes (or 15-20 minutes for grades 1 & 2 or younger). Of course this may be lengthened for older students.

Some strategies to help members deal with their parents’ divorce are as follows.

* Allow members to tell their story in their own words. It will likely be repeated numerous times throughout the duration of the group.
  + Children – especially elementary-aged children – will tend to expect their story to have the same shock value for everybody else as it as for them
  + As children retell aspects of their situation they will be able to compare how they feel with the reactions of group members. This will help them define a new “normal” way of how one should feel about their situation. Over time, the story will be gradually stripped of its emotional power, as peer members validate and normalize the child’s experience.
  + Peer validation of a child’s story (listening to story and reflecting back) is important for therapeutic impact
  + Some children may tell fantasies about their home situation or absent parent; they may report what they wish to be rather than what is. Developing and maintaining a communication channel with parents (both if possible) beforehand can help you recognize when this is occurring
* When beginning a group session, introduce a topic briefly and in such a way that it generates discussion
* Throughout groups sessions do what all counselors are trained to do – validate and normalize feelings and experiences, and practice good active listening skills and group facilitation skills.
* Drawing is another strategy. Have students draw a picture of their family, and also one of their absent parent (or two pictures – one for each household). This helps situations become more concrete and can be used to help children both see and share their family situation in more concrete terms as well as help mental health professional identify fantasies.
* Use of puppets – these can be used with primarily elementary-aged children to help them act out feelings and situations, and express definite ideas or issues. They can also be used in pre-role-play rehearsals. Children can also write and act out short plays using the puppets demonstrating specific group concerns or issues.
* Brainstorming, role-playing, and rehearsal (helps with desensitizing the group to the problems, clarifying issues, problem-solving, and communication skills)
  + When a student brings up a situation, the group first brainstorms responses. Be patient with initial outlandish or even revenge-oriented suggestions (this helps in group bonding and the diffusion of anger); over time bring group around to thinking of practical suggestions.
  + Pre-role-play or rehearse role-play with puppets if desired.
  + Student then chooses another member to role play with and instructs member how to play his or her family member being portrayed.
  + Students role-play a suggested solution while members critique and revise the scene (while also learning how to handle similar situations themselves)
  + Child is encouraged to try solution before next group meeting
  + Results of solution are shared and reviewed by group at next meeting
* Use of storybooks or videos – when using a storybook about divorce, use each page or paragraph as a stimulus to generate discussion. Videos can be used similarly.

While not comprehensive by any means, these strategies will hopefully provide a place to start when working with children and youth experiencing parental divorce.