Divorce: A Parents' Guide for Supporting Children

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Today, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly half of all first marriages end in divorce. Two thirds of these situations involve children. What effect will divorce have on children in both the short and long term? Differing advice from experts in the field as well as “expert advice” in the media adds to parents’ anxiety about divorce.

The good news is that, in the long term, approximately 80% of children of divorced parents become productive, well-adjusted, and successful adults. As they get older, their parents’ divorce becomes more and more a distant memory of a painful time, and a less active influence in their lives.

The other 20% of these children experience a variety of ongoing psychological and social difficulties that significantly interfere with their lives. As adults these people are twice as likely to experience mental illness, substance abuse, and failed relationships. In children, warning signs of coping difficulties can include problems in sleeping or eating, increased anger or sadness, fears, or regression.

Understanding the risk factors and what to expect at each stage of a child’s development will help parents promote their children’s successful adjustment and growth as the family goes through the divorce process.

Adjustment to Divorce Is an Ongoing Process

Children take many routes through divorce, depending heavily on the risks and protections they encounter along the way. It is difficult to predict exactly how divorce will affect a specific child. Parents can best help their children by providing as many protections as possible early on in the divorce process, knowing that no one can control all those factors and no one can protect children completely from all risks.

The most difficult time for children and, indeed, for everyone in the family, is the first year after the divorce because there are so many changes for everyone involved. By the second year, things typically begin to improve dramatically as parents get back on their feet and the family becomes more stable.

Key Risks and Protections for Children in Divorcing Families

Conflict between parents. Conflict between parents can be a key part of the divorce process, especially during the time immediately before and after the actual divorce. Witnessing conflict can be particularly confusing to the children because they love both parents and are generally torn in their loyalties to each of them.

While it is often difficult, if not impossible, to shield children from all parental conflict, it is important to do so. Parents must agree to put their children first by keeping them out of parental disagreements and holding such discussions away from the children.

It is especially harmful when parents involve the children, deliberately or by accident, in their conflicts by doing things such as complaining to the child about the other parent or by having the children pass on messages for the parents.

Turning children into “little adults.” Separation and divorce lead the single parents to shoulder increased work and responsibility within the home. Children of divorce often have increased responsibility, independence, and interdependence. This can be a positive outcome of this situation.

Trouble brews, however, when children are asked to shoulder more of the physical or emotional load than they are developmentally ready to manage. This can happen when one parent begins to lean on a child, often the eldest daughter or son, for emotional support or as a confidant in the absence of a spouse. While most children willingly try to meet their parent’s need for support, they tend to be psychologically unable to fulfill such an adult role and can grow up with lingering feelings of inadequacy and failure.

Parents can help by allowing their children to experience the joys and fewer responsibilities of childhood as much as possible. Parents can also develop and maintain their connections with other adults to meet their own needs for companionship and emotional support.

Parenting style. Parenting style is an important factor in children’s response to divorce. Some parents are generally warm and accepting of their children, but do not generally set limits or enforce rules or structure in the family. At times, they and their children appear to be almost peers or friends. Children raised in this way are less likely to develop good self-control and can be aggressive or impulsive.

Other parents harshly enforce a variety of rigid rules at home with less warmth or respect for the children. Children raised in this way may turn out to be angry, defiant, and dishonest in dealing with others.
Impact of Child Custody

As long as the custodial parent is loving, consistent, and provides structure and discipline, children can do well in families where either parent has custody or in joint custody arrangements. Children are most influenced by the parent they spend the most time with, but the non-custodial parent can exert an important additional protective influence if he or she remains involved with the children.

It is generally in the children’s long-term interest to have continuing and meaningful contact with both parents after a divorce.

According to research, roughly 60% of parents remarry six years after the divorce. With remarriage often comes a better standard of living, better schools for the children, and mutual emotional support for the parents. However, about 60% of these remarriages end in divorce. Often disagreement about raising the children is one of the issues of conflict between the new spouses.

Stepparenting is very difficult, and parents can enter a remarriage with unrealistic expectations about instantly bonding with stepchildren or quickly developing a close, smoothly running family. Differences in parenting styles, expectations for the children, and working out disciplinary roles can create stress for the new couple. Developing a working relationship between the children and stepparent is crucial in successful and happy remarriages.

Stepfamilies take time, effort, and patience to develop. It is usually best, especially at first, for the parent to continue as the primary disciplinarian, with the stepparent in a supporting role. However, parents also have to be willing to share parental roles that they once controlled exclusively themselves.

The stepparent’s main role is to try to develop a relationship with the stepchildren. One way to build relationships is to create family routines, customs, and traditions within the new family so that children begin to develop routines and memories that include the stepparent. Stepparents should not try to criticize or replace the non-custodial parent. This usually ends up hurting the step-parent’s relationship with the children.

Finally, it is important for the new spouses to nurture their relationship as a couple. Be careful not to lose sight of the children, but take opportunities to go out alone, find mutual interests, and find meaningful “adult time” together.

Conclusion

Parenting children through a divorce is a tough challenge. Reducing risks and building in protections is the way to help children navigate this journey safely. With affectionate, yet firm, consistent parenting, children from divorced families can grow up to be successful,
happy adults.

Resources


Covers parents’ most commonly asked questions about raising children during the divorce process.


Written for parents. This very readable book describes a multi-year study of many divorced families and how they adjusted over time. Much of the information in this handout was adapted from the information in this book.


Written for parents. Provides a complete guide to helping children on their journey through the parent’s divorce, including concrete information about how to handle issues and conflicts that come up at every stage of a child’s development.

Website

Divorce Headquarters—www.divorcehq.com

Like many websites devoted to divorce, this one places the emphasis on the legal issues involved with visitation, child support, taxes, insurance, and rights. It is a comprehensive, however, and includes a number of useful links to other sites concerning divorce.

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