

Supporting Children of Divorce: Guidelines for Caregivers

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The bond with a caregiver may be the most stable relationship for children whose parents are separating or getting a divorce. This NebGuide discusses how caregivers can help children cope with their emotions during this difficult time.

What Should I Look For? How Can I Help?

- Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce.
- Over 1 million children experience divorce every year in the United States.
- Forty percent of parents remarry after the first divorce.
- Two-thirds of these remarriages fail.

Child care professionals, elementary teachers, and family members often ask these questions while caring for children whose parents have separated or are divorcing.

- “How can I help them understand what is happening?”
- “Is this normal behavior?”
- “How can I manage their behavior while caring for other children?”
- “What signs of distress should I look for?”

Children of divorce exhibit behaviors that are similar to other children in their age group. However, there are times when they have mood swings with more frequency and intensity than children who are not experiencing divorce. Reactions depend on age, ego, temperament, and resources. The level and frequency of parental conflict witnessed by young children increases the level of anxiety exhibited in their behaviors.

Divorce is a grief experience surpassed only by the death of a parent. For most children divorce may be the first true grief they have experienced. Divorce is like having a life-threatening disease for which there is no cure. Children feel as if their life has changed forever, but they feel powerless to do anything about it. The anxiety of waiting for the next thing to happen and wondering whether it will be good or bad often causes behavior to escalate outwardly in a group.

Children in families who have experienced divorce or custody struggles may be caught in the middle of parental

conflicts. All humans, regardless of age, react to stress with the typical “fight or flight” response. Because of this human condition, it can take as long as 72 hours after witnessing or participating in a confrontation for the body and emotions of an adult or a child to return to normal. Unfortunately, during such times when the child needs extra understanding and patience, the parent has the least emotional energy to give to them.

Child Care Providers and Family Caregivers Provide Stability

The bond with a caregiver may be the most stable relationship for the child during the change in family structure. Changes during divorce can feel very uncomfortable. Sensitive care providers can establish a safe, secure, and familiar place for children to rest and regain perspective on family life, although they may not have actively experienced a divorce in their family. Children have a fear of loss and abandonment. “What if my parent divorces me, too?” “What if I have to give up my room, my things, my friends, my other parent?” The stability of a consistent caregiver provides security in the middle of chaos. Keeping things normal and stable at the child care center or school is important for this child and all of the other children in your care, too.

Psychological Reactions to Divorce

Caregivers may notice either subtle or extreme changes in the behavior of children during the process of separation and divorce. Psychological reactions to stress are normal to all humans, but children are especially vulnerable to the following feelings:

- *Sadness* — Overwhelming sadness may manifest itself as whining, crying, or withdrawal.
- *Guilt* — “I must have done something wrong for my parents to get a divorce.”
- *Fear* — “What if he/she leaves me, too?”
- *Embarrassment* — “Nobody else has parents who live in two different houses.”
- *Anger* — “I hate anyone who hurts me, and I don’t trust anyone or anything I don’t understand.”

- *Depression* — Headaches, stomach aches, and low morale; extreme feelings of sadness, low self-worth, and continued emotional or physical isolation.
- *Denial* — “Leave me alone! My mom and dad will get back together.”
- *Maturity* — Becoming the little adult.
- *Regression* — “Babyisms” in speech and behavior.

Four Goals of Behavior

- Contact — undue attention seeking
- Power — rebellion
- Protection — revenge
- Withdrawal — undue avoidance

— Active Parenting 2012

Managing Behavior

Behaviors depend on age, ego, temperament, and resources. Children have a goal in every behavior, but they are unlikely to be aware of it. It may take time for a caregiver to notice the reason for the behavior.





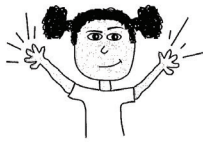
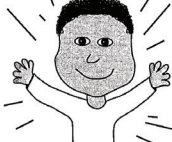










The following chart will provide a guide for what children from birth to eight years of age want to accomplish with their behavior:

For children to manage their own behavior, they need skills. The skill of “I messages” teaches children to identify feelings and to ask for changes, e.g., “I feel {name the feeling} when {tell what causes the feeling}. Will you or I would like {tell what would you like to change}.” Example: “I feel scared when you and Dad fight. Will you please not fight in front of me?”

Posting the “I Message”

For children age 7 and older, posting the “I Message” example in a place where children can see it may encourage them to problem-solve and self-manage behavior.

For in-home family caregivers, make a copy of this example, laminate it, add a magnet, and post on the refrigerator with an erasable marker close by.

<p style="text-align: center;">I Formula</p> <p>I feel _____ (feeling word)</p> <p>When _____ (tell what causes this feeling)</p> <p>I would like _____ (tell what you would like to change)</p>	 SAD	 WORRIED	 SURPRISED	 DISAPPOINTED
	 CONFIDENT	 HAPPY	 AFRAID	 TRUST
	 BORED	 REJECTED	 JEALOUS	 SAFE
	 ANGRY	 IMPORTANT	 PROUD	 LOVED

“Seek first to know and then to understand” is a cornerstone of Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. This concept is a priority in effectively caring for children. Often the best thing a caregiver can do is listen. Providing direction while teaching children to problem-solve is another important behavior management skill.

Caregivers need no special training. They should just draw upon the same empathetic qualities that make them loving caregivers of children.

How to Be a Compassionate Caregiver

1. Listen
2. Love
3. Laugh
4. Let them solve problems with you as a coach.
5. Let them move on to other things when they are ready.
6. Lead them and the parents to a counselor if they need more help than you can give.

What Do Kids Want?

Judith Wallerstein says, “For most children, the news that their parents are divorcing arrives like a bolt of lightning.” You may have been arguing, fighting, even living apart, but to children this becomes their “normal” life. When you tell them this will change, they are thunderstruck.

The participants of Kids Talk About Divorce, an educational program for children whose parents are divorcing, range in age from 5-18. These children say they want to know that they are loved. They want to know that they are safe and that everything will be OK. What can a caregiver do for the child of divorce? According to the children themselves: “Just hold me. Tell me it wasn’t my fault. Tell me that I can love both parents and spend time with both parents and, most of all, that you will be there for me.”

When they are ready to move on and do things normally and on their own, they will. They won’t consult you and say, “I’m ready!” They will begin to problem-solve on their own and seek encouragement for the new experiences they are learning.

Positives for Children of Divorce

- Divorce can be a time for personal growth.
- Divorce can be the start of a better life for children.
- Divorce can teach kids resilience, perhaps better than any other experience.
- Divorce can teach children responsibility.
- Divorce can teach children respect for different ways of thinking and acting.

Resources

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