

How Divorce Affects Children: Developmental Stages

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Children are affected by divorce in many ways. This NebGuide explains to caregivers the behavior to look for and actions to take to help children, newborn to age 12, cope.

Divorce affects children. All children grow through developmental behavior changes, but children who experience divorce may demonstrate more atypical behaviors because of the impact of the divorce. It is not uncommon for children to experience regression to earlier stages of development or to display aggression with peers, siblings, family members, and care providers during this stressful time. The following age appropriate guidelines are important to consider for those who interact with children during a divorce.

Birth to 6 Months

Research suggests the developing fetus and newborns are very perceptive and can feel the mother's emotions and feelings. Therefore, baby may react to a mother's tension during divorce with agitated movements. Babies exhibit irritability and hyperactivity when parents are stressed. They may cry frequently and have sleep or digestive problems. Infants do not recognize "divorce" as the cause of distress, but they may react to the tension-charged atmosphere when they feel their security and safety is threatened.

Action: Anxious infants are more secure when held frequently and securely. Provide plenty of affection. A calm, soothing voice and eye contact will reassure the child that their needs are met. Quality and consistency of childcare is important at this age.

- Hold infants frequently and securely
- Be affectionate
- Use a calm, soothing voice
- Make eye contact

6 to 12 Months

Attachments are critical at this age. An infant can distinguish between parents and other loving caregivers. Children at this age are aware of the absence of a parent and are increasingly fearful of separation, strangers, and nightmares. Transitioning from one parent to the other may cause crabbiness and clinging to the point of being inconsolable.

Action: Quality and consistent care by loving parents and caregivers reaffirms the trust bond and teaches the child that needs will be met.

- Keep familiar things close-by for comfort (blankets, bottles, toys, pacifiers, or favorite stuffed animal).
- Shorten separation time between child and primary parent to one to four hours.
- Maintain routines between caregivers (sleeping, eating, playtime, and naps).
- Both parents should write in a shared notebook to communicate how child is doing.

12 to 24 Months

While children at this age are developing their language skills, research shows toddlers know when friends are present (for example, in daycare) and show it through increased interactions with peers. If the friend is absent, the toddler may exhibit bad moods and temper tantrums. When needs are not met, toddlers may regress to earlier stages of behavior and can experience sleep problems. They also may exhibit an increased need to cling to parents or other adults. These are signs that toddlers are trying to cope with issues beyond their understanding.

Actions: Provide plenty of affection and patience. Consistent and loving attention from all those close to the toddler is essential. Some of these actions include firm

guidelines for naps, bedtime rituals, meal times, and play times. Extra time and patience may be needed to prepare toddlers for these daily activities when they are feeling stressed. To develop a strong parent/child attachment means both parents must spend time with the child. One great way to develop children's skills and encourage bonding between child and parent is to play with your child.

Games to Play

Sing special songs, jump, and dance
Play Peek-A-Boo
Read a special book
Encourage creativity with crayons, markers, etc.
Fill a container with objects
Hide a toy under a blanket and ask, "Where did it go?"

Preschool

Watch out! These children are beginning to model behaviors they have learned, especially from the same-gender parent. They develop a conscience and usually know right from wrong. Children of this age believe the world revolves around them; thus, if the family breaks up, they feel guilty. They feel responsible for the divorce. They believe parents will remarry each other. In their hearts, the top feelings are fear and sadness. In their head, they know that one parent no longer lives with them. Peers become important for additional support at this age. They don't talk about their feelings much, but they express them through play.

Actions:

- Be consistent with routines, affection, and boundaries.
- Give them only the information they need.
- Express love and concern.
- Help them understand many types of families and strengths of each family.

Children this age also love pretend play and storytelling. You might also read age appropriate books about different types of families and divorce. Encourage and have the children act out their feelings through puppet plays or to their imaginary friend. This is a good example of play therapy, which has been proven to be very effective for young children who are experiencing such disruption.

6 to 8 Years

Independence is the number one goal of the early school-aged child. Friends continue to be important, but parents are the core of the child's existence. The adult/

parent behaviors teach children more than their words at this age. The motto is, "Do what I do **and** do what I say." It is important to use respect when talking with children about the other parent. This modeling will help children identify feelings and express them in an appropriate way.

Action: Reinforcing rules and giving positive feedback will help children develop personal goals, limits, and self-rewards. Games and activities may help with this task. For example, painting "worry rocks" is a way to help children express feelings and learn to respect how others feel. Choosing appropriate words is important for children this age. "I hate you!" doesn't say nearly as much as, "I feel scared when you and Dad fight." "I" messages and identifying words that hurt will help this age group. Consistency, boundaries, logical consequences, and a big dose of affection are the best tools to use with these kids.

9 to 12 Years

This group begins to understand the concept of morals. They are told to do "moral" things, but when they see parents break rules it creates a conflict within children; thus, morality often becomes confusing. Who are rules for anyway? Kids experiencing divorce at this age feel deep anger and often don't even know why they are angry. They feel cheated, hurt, guilty, and just plain mad! It is not unusual to see fights at this age because the emotional trigger is on "sensitive."

Action: Provide consistency and widening boundaries along with bigger consequences for poor decision-making. Offer physical and creative activities to express pent-up emotion in appropriate ways. Sports are a great way to relieve tension. Chores give them a way to work off the aggression. Stress rules for not harming others when angry. Positive feedback is a most important reward. It comes in the form of hugs and pats on the back. Prepubescent girls and boys need coaching on sexual mores. Girls living with same-gender parents often seem precocious in relationships with males. Children of this age usually are able to understand some of the problems in their parents' divorce and should be included in family decisions about visitation, family conferences, and the day-to-day working needs of the family unit. At this age, all kids benefit from having a significant adult in a mentor role who will make them feel special and secure.

Things to do with tweens:

- Try walking, swimming, skateboarding, horse riding, ice skating, bike riding, etc., with them.
- Join them in a group activity, such as 4-H or Scouts.
- Watch them play team sports.

Resources

Literature:

Bode, Janet and Mack, Stan. *For Better, For Worse-A Guide to Surviving Divorce for Preteens and Their Families* (2001). Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, New York.

Johnston, Janet R. and Roseby, Vivienne. *In the Name of the Child-A Developmental Approach to Understanding and Helping Children of Conflicted and Violent Divorce* (1997). The Free Press, New York.

Wasserman, Selma. *The Long Distance Grandmother — How to Stay Close to Distant Grandchildren* (2001). Harlley & Marks Publishers, Inc, Point Roberts, Washington.

Woolfork, A., and Perry, N. E. *Child and Adolescent Development* (2012). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

NebGuides:

Ages and Stages: Infant (0-12 Months), G2103
<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g2103.pdf>

Ages and Stages: 3-, 4- and 5-Year-Olds, G2106
<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g2106.pdf>

Ages and Stages: Toddler (12-24 Months), G2104
<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g2104.pdf>

Ages and Stages: 2- and 3-Year-Olds, G2105
<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g2105.pdf>

Ages and Stages: 3-, 4- and 5-Year-Olds, G2106
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Divorce Impacts on Children and Youth on Ag Almanac
April 4, 2013
<http://agalmanac.unl.edu/familyandcommunity>

Children Books

Two Homes by Claire Masurel (Ages 3-6)

The Family Book by Todd Parr (Ages 4-6)

Dinosaurs Divorce by Marc Brown and Laurie Krasny Brown (Ages 4-8)

Let's Talk About It: Divorce by Fred Rogers (Ages 4-8)

At Daddy's on Saturdays by Linda Walvoord Girard (Ages 5-8)

A Smart Girl's Guide to Her Parents' Divorce: How to Land on Your Feet When Your World Turns Upside Down by Nancy Holyoke (Ages 9-12)

The Divorce Express by Paula Danzinger (Ages 9-12)

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Issued August 2013

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