

Divorce Through the Eyes of Adolescents

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Parents can help their adolescent deal with divorce by understanding what they are feeling and helping them to communicate effectively.

As if being on the roller coaster of adolescence isn't tough enough, some youth also experience the aftermath of divorce. Parents divorce each other, but children often feel the pain more than parents realize. Children may be resilient with most life events but divorce requires more education and support.

In many cases, divorce requires children, especially adolescents, to assume independence and adult responsibilities. Needless to say, many youth are not ready for such responsibility. Previous rebellious behavior or bad decision-making may lead the adolescent to assume guilt for the divorce. Parents are responsible for providing age appropriate information and ongoing support to help the adolescent cope and grow throughout the divorce process.

What is Adolescence?: Typical Changes

Adolescence begins somewhere between ages 10 and 12; some areas of development can continue into young adulthood (ages 19 to 25). Typically adolescence is marked by the changes of puberty (*Table I*).

Table I. Typical changes experienced by youth during adolescence

<i>Development</i>	<i>Typical Changes</i>
Mind	Start <i>thinking about thinking</i> , develop abstract thoughts
Body	Growth spurt, change in body shape
Emotions and Relationships	More independent, relationships with friends become more important, more extreme mood changes

Indicators of Behavior Change

Indicators of adolescent behavior change due to conflict within the family may include:

- Change in academic performance.
- Loss of enthusiasm for group activities.
- Loss of enthusiasm for hobbies.
- Aggressive reactions to situations.
- Increased illness.
- Change in friends.
- Prolonged isolation.

Talking to a counselor or attending a support group for children of divorce may ease the tension and fears. Support groups allow the adolescent to see that others experience similar feelings. Research shows that the adolescent of divorce is at greater risk of alcohol and drug use, teen pregnancies, running away, gang involvement, and aggressive behaviors.

Gender Response to Divorce

Do girls or boys adjust better to divorce? A difference in how aggression is expressed was found to be significant. For example, boys generally display overt physical and verbal aggression. They are identified as bullies or problems in the classroom. Girls tend to internalize their aggression by crying, pouting, and manipulating situations. They also experience more physical symptoms, like headaches and stomachaches. Girls are more likely than boys to turn to someone of the opposite sex to find comfort and a renewed sense of importance, which may lead to increased sexual activity.

Messages from Adolescents

“At first I felt sorry for myself, doing more chores at home, plus holding down a full-time job. Then I realized I was handling everything and I felt great.” (Gaby, 17)

“Divorce sucks! I can’t believe my parents tell me to act my age when they certainly don’t!” (Angie, 15)

“Parents are always worried about what others think. Why don’t they want to know what I think?” (Hastings, 13)

Communicating Feelings

The adolescent often grieves for the loss of family memories more than younger kids. Often past events take on a rosier glow in memory than when they actually occurred. Help adolescents cope by continuing to participate in routine everyday activities, like shared mealtime, with your children. Shock and denial, anger, depression and detachment, bargaining, dialogue, and acceptance are the stages of the grief cycle experienced by adolescents during the transition divorce (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Stages of the grief cycle

Parents can help adolescents transition through the grief cycle by:

- listening;
- helping the teen to identify feelings;
- communicating using “I” messages;
- remaining calm, and
- assuring the teen of their love.

How to Use “I” Messages

Helping adolescents cope during the divorce includes intentionally using good communication skills. This means parents and important adults in the child’s life should be fully present in the conversation by using one’s eyes, ears, and facial expressions. Teens notice and begin to resent when adults don’t take time to really listen to them. One really great

way to communicate with teens is to use “I” messages when addressing a particular problem or challenging behavior. It is equally important to encourage teens to use “I” messages, as well as to express their feelings and emotions.

The structure of an “I” message is:

I feel... (explain feelings) when... (explain behavior) because... (explain why). Could we... (explain a solution) is great for adults to use.

An example of an I message teens would use would be: *I feel uncomfortable when you argue with Mom/Dad in front of me because I don’t like seeing you fight. Could you wait to talk about those things when I am not around?*

Whose Conflict is it Anyway?

Conflict between parents is very hard for teenagers to deal with. It is an upsetting part of life before, after, and during a divorce or separation.

Unresolved anger between parents may spill over on the adolescent. Parents who are stressed with unresolved anger, daily survival, and restructuring a new life may overreact to normal adolescent behavior. In this instance, the youth could say, “Gee, Mom/Dad, I know I messed up and that you’re stressed, but it wasn’t that bad! Are you really mad at me?”

This will often serve as a key for the parent to check personal feelings, remove past memories of the other parent, and focus on the issue of discipline with the adolescent clearly in focus.

What can an adolescent do?	What can a parents/adults do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with both parents. • Let parents manage their conflict. • Stay out of the middle of discussions. • Don’t manipulate situations. • Don’t take sides or spy. • Don’t carry stories. • Accept each parent for who they are. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance giving freedom and maintaining control. • Let adolescents make some decisions about how to spend their time. • Respect privacy and protect adolescents from risks. • Be warm and nurturing and enforce rules and expectations. • Allow for discussion with your adolescent — it encourages reasoning ability.

My Parents Are Dating!

Adolescents may understand what their parents are going through with divorce because they have probably split up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, but the thought of parents dating is not appealing! Adolescents find it difficult to recognize their parents as sexual beings. Dating takes careful timing and communication for adolescent acceptance.

Remember, parents are the adults who primarily teach youth how to form relationships. Share information on an “as needed” basis explaining that parents also need to have adult friends and privacy. Parents should keep kids informed of who they are dating, keep the interactions short, if at all, until the person becomes a significant part of the parent’s life. Slowly introduce the significant other when the couple relationship is stable and ready to deal *together* with the feedback from adolescents. The significant other should not try to assume a parental role but should develop a sincere friendship with the adolescent.

Will They Survive?

Positive growth can happen in families where people listen to each other, practice “I” messages, positive anticipation, and parental cooperation. It *is* possible to survive divorce and still be typically developing adolescents. As Heatherington and Kelly (2002), conclude in their comprehensive study of divorce in America:

“Although they looked back on their parents’ breakup as a painful experience, most were successfully going about the chief tasks of young adulthood: establishing careers, creating intimate relationships, and building meaningful lives for themselves. Most unexpectedly — since it has seldom been reported before — a majority of (my) young adults emerged from divorce and postnuclear family life enhanced.”

Therefore, to answer the question, *Will they survive?* we answer with a resounding YES!

Resources

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