

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE: GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS



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DIVORCE / SEPARATION

The decision to divorce or separate is never an easy one and should not be taken lightly. The decision can be especially complicated when there are children involved. This handout is to help the parent understand what children go through during a divorce / separation and how to handle it.

The first step to take is to inform your child/children about the divorce. Unfortunately this is easier said than done. In some instances couples will temporarily split to have some time to consider the final decision. The temporary split could be beneficial for the couple in the long run but unfortunately it is very confusing to the children. If you are considering living apart on a temporary basis then you should still be honest with your children about the situation. Inform them about how their lives are going to be influenced, especially the living arrangements. It doesn't help to tell your children that your partner is away on a trip and that you're not sure when they'll be back. Children are intuitive and they will know that you are lying to them. It is important to establish a final date for when the decision will be made. For younger children you can mark the date on a calendar.

Once the decision has been made it is up to you to decide if you want to use a lawyer or mediator. Mediators are cheaper but since it is still a new concept in South Africa, people still tend to make use of lawyers. If you want to use a mediator but there are a lot of financial issues involved, it will be to the couple's benefit to first go to a financial advisor and take that information to the mediator. Mediators can not represent you in court like a lawyer but in South Africa you can represent yourself in the divorce court with the official documents. This includes the document from the mediator, called a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and a Parenting Plan as an Annexure. You can go online to the Mediators Association of South Africa for more information (www.saam.org.za)

Since this office is more involved in the Parenting Plan, we can refer you to a mediator or you can go to one of your choice. You can also use the MOU with the Parenting Plan and then go to a lawyer as a couple; this will minimize the cost. If a couple uses one lawyer the costs can be drastically reduced; by at least 30%. The Parenting Plan must in future, by law, be a part of the settlement agreement of any divorce. The original implementing date was 1 November 2009, but since no official announcement has been made it can be assumed that there will be a postponement. The Parenting Plan can be drawn up by the couple themselves but it is recommended that a qualified mediator with counselling experience assist the couple.

Please ask this office for more information about the Parenting Plan if you are unfamiliar with it and / or need assistance to draw one up.

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

The decision to divorce is usually made at a high point of stress. Children are very sensitive to conflict between their parents, and while disagreement is normal in any family, a continuation of conflict makes things worse for the children.

What makes the difference as to whether the child will do well or be adversely affected during and after the divorce? The following are some suggestions.

Children need:

- Parents to stop fighting, settle some of their angry feelings, and resolve some of the difficulties.
- Constant contact with both parents.
- Parents to accept the situation and move on.
- Acknowledgement from parents that it is a sad situation and that they are sorry it did not work out.
- To hear clearly in a language they can understand what changes will be taking place.
- To know where they will live, with whom and what the changes will involve, i.e. school, house, suburb, family relationships etc.
- To know that parents don't divorce children, that they will continue to have access to both parents, that they won't be forgotten or neglected.
- To hear that parents are trying to cope to make things better, and that things will work out.
- To be heard and listened to, and to be talked to.
- To hear parents respect each other.

Reactions children may demonstrate during separation and divorce include the following:

Fear, sadness, lethargy, withdrawal, worry, moodiness, rejection, loneliness, conflict of loyalties, anger, acting out, guilt, absentmindedness, drop in school performance, nervousness, loss of self-esteem and confidence, physical complaints.

Recommendations for parents going through a divorce:

- Avoid conflict with your spouse in front of the children
- Avoid slandering your spouse in front of the children in order to win their loyalty
- Facilitate regular visits to the “absent” parent
- Provide love and support for the children
- Keep children informed of what will happen to them

One of the most important recommendations is to ensure a continued positive relationship between both parents, during and after divorce.

Children suffer ill effects if overburdened by having to support their parents persistently, becoming involved in parental disputes and being caught up in a role reversal between the generations.

CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

For children divorce is:

- a) Frightening:
 - They often don't understand their parents' anger, depression, fanatic behaviour etc.
 - They fear that they will be left by both parents.
 - They fear the lack of money.
 - They fear for their own safety and that of their parents.
 - They fear the changes that take place.
- b) A time of guilt:
 - They believe they have caused the divorce.
 - They believe they have been “bad” and therefore are being punished.
- c) A time of feeling rejected:
 - By their parents.
 - By their friends.
 - By their grandparents.
 - They might feel that they are a nuisance.
- d) A time of feeling split:
 - A feeling of being split in between their parents.
 - A feeling that they can't lose both.
 - A feeling that they are forced to take sides.
- e) A lonely time:
 - They often feel isolated.
 - They feel unloved and are often left alone more than prior to the divorce.
- f) A time of added responsibility:
 - They feel responsible for their parents' happiness and for the household chores & finances.

- g) A time of sadness:
 - They grieve the loss of their family unit, their friends, their house and pets.
 - They will lose their old familiar way of life.

- h) A time of shame and embarrassment:
 - At being a product of divorce.
 - At their parents' new attitudes and behavioural patterns.

- i) A time of confusion:
 - Their stable predictable world often becomes unpredictable and unstable.
 - Adults are perceived to be unreliable.
 - Family life is unimportant and relationships don't last (important in long term attitude).

The way in which children interpret and perceive their parents' divorce can have a long term impact on their own relationships and how they perceive themselves as well as their worldview.

Important things to remember:

- Parents should understand the impact that divorce has on children.
- Parents should negotiate to become co-parents.
- The legal system ensures that maintenance and custody / access issues are upheld and that they are in the best interests of the child.
- Parents should ensure that they are helped to deal with their own emotions.
- Parents should ensure that the divorce is as amicable as possible.

POINTS TO EXPLAIN TO YOUR CHILDREN

It is important that your children are prepared and the circumstances are explained. Use the following guidelines to help you through the explanation process:

- Your parents are getting a divorce.
- You did not cause it.
- You won't be able to change it in the future.
- Both parents want you to know that they love you now just as they have always loved you and this love will not change.
- Children do not have to choose between parents.
- The parents may still have arguments in the future. Most adults do but you do not have to take sides in these arguments.
- Future living arrangements are _____

EFFECTS ON CHILDREN AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS AFTER SEPARATION/DIVORCE

INFANCY: Birth to 2 plus

The child is highly dependant on the parents.

There is a strong physical and emotional dependence on the primary caretaker. Unexplained or lengthy separation from that parent can be a source of intense emotional distress.

The child has a different concept of time from adults. A few hours often seems like a very long time. This is important when considering access arrangements.

High levels of conflict between parents can be stressful particularly during visitation / access times.

Common Behaviours

Mistrust, insecurity, separation anxiety, crying/wining, clinging, aggression, hyperactivity – discipline issues, withdrawal, depressive anxiety, disrupted patterns affecting sleeping/eating/toilet training and physical illness.

Suggestions for Parents

The child should have shorter periods away from the custodial home, but more frequent regular contact with the visiting parent.

From both parents there should be consistency in the explanations in a language the child can understand. If possible combine (both parents together) information giving.

Make use of phone calls, photographs and letters/cards.

PRE-SCHOOL: 2 plus to 5 years

Children are a little more independent at this age, yet they still have a different concept of time than an adult.

Children can react to separation with shock / depression.

A long period away from primary caregiver creates stress. If the conflict between parents is high, the child is unlikely to cope easily with overnight periods away from the primary caregiver.

Common Behaviours

Clingy / demanding, other attention-seeking behaviour.

Regression, i.e. children drop back in their development through changes in sleeping patterns, toilet habits and deterioration in language skills.

Unwillingness to go to play school / nursery school.

Fantasies of power. Children of this age have a rich fantasy life which parents need to be aware of when listening to the children's comments / stories.

Fears, e.g. of abandonment, what will happen to me?

Suggestions for Parents

Although some behaviours can be alarming, most are normal and will pass as children adapt to new situations. Children need extra attention, time, and understanding from the parents during the adjustment period.

Routines, everyday tasks and continuity help to make a child feel more secure.

Do not give the child too much responsibility – the parent must remain the parent.

CHILDREN: 5 to 12 years

During this stage younger children will begin to express their feelings, whilst the older child seems to be more able and more verbal.

Children often wish to restore their parents' marriage, and behave in ways to bring this about, e.g. working very hard at school, being "good".

There is conflict between staying at home or going to the other parent. This results in conflicted loyalties.

Children fear that the parents will be replaced by others, that the houses, dogs, cats, will also be replaced.

Common Behaviours

Worries can be expressed through difficult behaviour (truancy) or withdrawal (daydreaming) at school or with family and friends.

Physical symptoms might occur such as headaches, stomach-aches, feeling "sick" and nightmares.

Additional worries can include the feeling of guilt or self-blame for the divorce.

If conflict is high between the parents, children learn to cope by sometimes rejecting one of the parents.

There is a yearning for the “absent” parent and idolising might occur.

Suggestions for Parents

Children in this age group begin to benefit from the experience of groups outside the family, and may also take up a hobby or sport. Access arrangements need to take the children’s activities and interests into consideration. Relationships with grandparents, extended family members and peers can become more meaningful. Moral issues are important at this age. Parents need to be as open and clear in their communication as possible.

ADOLESCENCE: 12 to 16 plus

Adolescents are becoming more independent of their parents, even in families that are not going through a divorce. Adolescents often need space and time to work out their own reactions to separation and divorce. They could react strongly with anger and rejection to pressures from either parent.

Sometimes the adolescent manipulates the conflict between their parents in order to resolve issues over freedom and parental control, and thereby escape parental control.

Children are expected to be an adult and a child.

There are expectations of meeting the needs of the lonely parent.

Common Behaviours

Anger, blaming, guilt, withdrawal, need for privacy.
Loyalty conflicts, insecurity in own heterosexual relationships and identity.
Having difficulty with their parents’ sexuality.
Own expectations of marriage are shaken.
Financial concerns.
Fears, watching parents change.
Use of alcohol, drugs, joining unacceptable peer groups.

Suggestions for Parents

Continue parenting rather than being a “best friend”.
Work out finances with appropriate and relevant “others” – not with the child.
Try to keep open, courteous communication between each other to prevent manipulation and misunderstandings.
Encourage negotiating issues – democratic parenting.
See the child’s behaviour for what it is.
Work out a mutually acceptable way to explain “outside relationships” to adolescents.

STAGES OF WHAT CHILDREN GO THROUGH DURING DIVORCE / SEPARATION

The feelings experienced by a child will change as time passes. As in a grieving process following the death of a loved one, there are clearly identifiable emotional stages through which children pass as they try to deal with the break up of the family. These stages are:

- Fear and anxiety
- Abandonment and rejection
- Aloneness and sadness
- Frustration and anger
- Rejection and resentment, and
- Re-establishment of trust.

Let us look at them more closely.

Stage 1: Fear and Anxiety

The conflict between the parents just before a divorce can take many forms; sometimes it is yelling, screaming, fighting and there are clear messages sent to the child that something is wrong. BUT children do not always foresee a divorce coming. Usually they deny the seriousness of the conflict and engage in wishful thinking that all will work out in the long term.

Other forms of conflict may be silent and less visible. No hint is given if yelling does not happen, but they can feel the long silences between the parents and they feel something is wrong. They also do not see a divorce on their hands.

No matter what form the conflict takes, the final announcement of a divorce is always a surprise to the children. Their first emotional reaction is one of panic, fear and anxiety.

Signs of that can be restlessness, sleeplessness, nightmares, sweating, hyperventilation, tummy problems etc.

What to do:

Give calm reassurance to your child about what exactly is going on and discuss your plans very clearly. Remember we can deal with things better if we know what to expect. If you do not discuss it, they will imagine possibilities that can entail even worse outcomes than what really might happen. Explain to them that you are busy with a parenting plan to ensure that they will be looked after properly, physically and emotionally. When it is finalized, you will explain it to them.

Children, who are not old enough to understand, need physical reassurance. Spend time with your child at their familiar environment; show your love openly and frequently. Love is the great antidote for anxiety.

Stage 2: Abandonment and Rejection

Stage one soon gives way to the next stage, feelings of rejection and abandonment. Even though deep down they know it is not true, they often feel abandoned and rejected. Younger children tend to have these feelings more than older children, they can not distinguish between the parents separating from each other and one of the parents separating from them.

If one of the parents is involved in another relationship and there are children involved, these feelings may be worse.

During the early stages of a divorce there may be a lot of conflict and it is then especially important to work on your child's feeling of rejection / abandonment.

What to do:

The antidote for these feelings is regular contact, especially with the parent that moved out.

Remember that the parenting plan address regular contact.

Parents need to call a truce at this time for the sake of the children.

You have to make time for contact; it is not going to happen naturally. A child needs your actual, physical, warm presence and telephone calls won't do it either. Arrange time to be with your child in the beginning (your physical presence reassures them). You can gradually phase it out.

Stage 3: Aloneness and Sadness

Sooner or later feelings of extreme aloneness and isolation kick in. Children find they have more time on their hands; this is because family activities came to a halt. Mealtimes change, conflict is less, (leaving a void) and no more doing things as a family. Then the loneliness sets in, and children can be surprised to find that for the first time in their lives they experience a deep sadness. It can be a pain in the stomach, dull headaches or tightness in the chest. Hobbies are neglected and pets may be ignored. Energy is less and they loose interest in things like schoolwork, friends or even eating. It can be the first signs of symptoms associated with depression.

During this time children spend a lot of their time thinking and this may be why they become sad. Thinking can be wishful daydreaming, fantasizing of a possible reunion etc. Some children also have crying spells, sometimes explainable but sometimes for no reason they can pinpoint.

What to do:

Allow your child to cry and avoid making them feel embarrassed or ashamed for their crying. Tears are healthy and serve an important physiological function in helping us overcome sadness. Be there with your child and make sure you still spend time as a family (if possible) with them on special occasions like their birthdays. Show them what you have discussed in the parenting plan and explain what will happen on their

birthdays. If possible, arrange for family outings even if both parents can not be present. Create new habits and rituals. They miss the rituals tremendously!

Stage 4: Frustration and Anger

Children want to see a return to the way things were before the divorce and they can feel that their needs are blocked or neglected. Children can experience a deep frustration because of the blocked needs out of which flow feelings of anger.

Normally anger is a response to frustration to help us overcome the blocking of some goal or desire. The child in a divorce has many blocked desires, so it is natural for them to have these feelings. The problem is that their anger can not in this case help overcome the obstacles! Decisions are made outside the realm of the child's influence. Some children can lash out where others will turn their anger inward and may do something to hurt him / herself.

What to do:

Do not react to your child's anger with anger. You will only aggravate the situation and provoke even more anger.

They need to feel understood and be assured that it is okay to feel like that although it is not a license for unacceptable behaviour. Give statements like "Tell me how angry you are, most children get angry in similar situations". Do not tell them they have no right to be angry! Do not defend yourself or make excuses for the divorce, just allow the anger but make sure he / she understands that nothing they can do will change the situation. It is not in their power to make changes. Stay with the same facts you gave them when you originally explained the divorce to them.

Stage 5: Rejection and Resentment

This stage is specifically directed toward the parents. The anger may still be there but it takes a back seat now. Children may put emotional distance between themselves and the parent for their own protection but also to punish the parent.

It can be in the form of pouting, giving parents the silent treatment or they will not respond when you call them. They resist doing something for you with reasons like "I forgot". Older children can be very critical during this stage and condemn others especially the people closest to them, like brothers and sisters. Also using statements like "I hate you!" is common during this stage.

Girls can compare making unfavourable comparisons to get back at their fathers e.g "Mary's father always takes her away on weekends" or something similar.

They almost test your love by being rude. They just want to make sure you love them. We call it reaction formation. When we desperately want to be loved but fear that we may be rejected, we turn our longing for love around and begin to show hate. A wise parent will see this behaviour for what it is: a desperate attempt to gain love!

What to do:

Ignore rude statements if you can, but be clear about what kind of behaviour and communication are allowed in the home. **DO NOT TAKE IT PERSONALLY.** If you can and your child allows you, take him / her in your arms and assure them of your love. The anger will subside.

Stage 6: Re-establishment of Trust

This is a very freeing stage; it feels like a fresh breeze in an otherwise hot and stuffy room. How long it takes, is difficult to say and will depend on the situation. Many factors are involved; recovery time differs for all people. It can take a few months but also a few years.

What to do:

Do not change too many things during the initial stages of the divorce.

Try not to be preoccupied with your own feelings, be sensitive to your children's. Allow time for healing, do not be impulsive and remember there are no quick remedies.

Maintain a stable environment, stick to their known routine.

CONCLUSION

The main things to remember is to keep to the routine if possible, talk to your child, do not bad mouth the other parent and respect each other. Children are adaptable, they will suffer but with love and patience they will survive. Please make an appointment with this counsellor for help with the divorce process, parenting plans, how to handle and safeguard your children and information about mediation.