

Communicating with children about divorce

It is important for parents to think about what they are going to say to children about the divorce. If possible, both parents should be available to answer children's questions. During this process, parents should try to remain calm and discuss the most important, immediate issues. Children's understanding of the divorce process depends upon their age. Parents need to keep in mind that children have different thoughts and feelings depending upon their age.

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- Children and divorce: Ages and Stages

Children and divorce: Ages and Stages

• Infants

○ **Trust and Physical Needs**

Infants are dependent upon their parents and learn to trust their parents early in life. It is important for parents to actively try to establish trusting bonds with their children. This allows children to develop emotionally.

○ **Tension in the Home**

Even during infancy, infants are able to detect tension, but they do not understand why it is happening. Infants may appear nervous and may display emotional outbursts frequently.

○ **Possible Reactions to Tension**

Uneasy stomach, irregular eating habits, loss of appetite

○ **Solutions for Parents**

Maintain a normal routine, ask friends and family for help, provide infant with favorite toys or security items, parent should try to get plenty of rest, so they are alert when infant is awake

• Toddlers

○ **Individual Personality**

Toddlers are beginning to develop their own individual personalities. Children are talkative and interested in exploring their environment. They are also becoming more independent.

○ **Tension in the Home**

Toddlers need a predictable, stable environment. They want their immediate needs met, even if there is tension in the home. At this age, the children's world is centered around themselves. Therefore, they may not pay attention to the tension happening around them.

○ **Possible Reactions to Tension**

An increase in crying, wanting more attention than usual, sleeping difficulties, may express anger toward parent

○ **Solutions for Parents**

Maintain a normal routine, be very nurturing and give children extra attention, spend quality time with children, ask friends and family for help

- **Preschoolers**

- **Cognitive Development**

- Preschoolers are learning new words and their level of thinking is becoming more complex. They may feel that they are the cause of the divorce, but feel they have no power in controlling outcomes.

- **Tension in the Home**

- Preschoolers do not understand the concept of divorce and may feel that the tension in the home is their responsibility. It is important for parents to reassure their preschooler with physical and verbal affection.

- **Possible Reactions to Tension**

- Exhibiting anxiety or fear about the future, feeling a sense of responsibility, keeping anger bottled up, having nightmares, unpleasant thoughts or ideas

- **Solutions for Parents**

- Reading books to children helps them academically, and is a great way for parents and children to form a close bond, spending time with children daily can be fun and relaxing for both parents and children

- **Elementary School Aged Children**

- **Peer Interaction**

- Divorce can be difficult for elementary school aged children. During elementary school, children are creating new peer relationships. They may come home with controversial questions about the divorce. It is important for parents to be open to talking with their children about the divorce.

- **Problems with the Divorce**

- Younger children do not understand the concept of divorce, and may feel that their parents are divorcing them. Some children may blame one parent for the divorce, so it is important for parents to explain that the blame is not on either one of the parents. Being honest about the situation is vital for children's emotional development.

- **Possible Reactions to the Divorce**

- Believing that parents will get back together, feelings of rejection by parent who left the house, feelings of insecurity about the future

- **Solutions for Parents**

- Try to get children to open up about their feelings, spend quality time together, reassure children's safety, respect children's privacy, encourage outside school activities



Monthly tip for families:

Take a walk to the park with your children and remind them that you love them.

- **Adolescent (Early and Late)**

- **Identity of Self and Peer Interactions**

In early adolescence, children are developing and discovering their identities. The focus of their lives changes from parents and home to peers. Adolescents are aware of the situations taking place at home, and can be critical about the situation. In late adolescence, children are ready to gain total independence. Peers and school are becoming more important than family. A parental divorce affects adolescents emotionally, and they often want to spend time alone. However, they still need their parents to provide guidance and support.

- **Possible Reactions to the Divorce**

Feelings of anger and hatred, may try to take advantage of both parents, unpredictable behavior, wanting to know who to blame, choosing sides, feelings of being alone

- **Solutions for Parents**

Communicate with adolescents as much as possible, be aware of how children are behaving at school, do not involve children in parental disputes, consider family counseling, maintain consistent household rules



Additional Resources:

www.extension.usu.edu/stepfamily

www.healthyrelationshipsutah.org

www.strongermarriage.org

www.stepfamilies.info

www.twoofus.org

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