

Clear-Eyed Coping to

BY
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SINGER

Help Your Child



No matter who initiates a divorce, it often comes as a shock to one spouse and the children.

Initially family members must confront their own fears about what will happen. When will children see each parent? Will a move occur or will a parent be able to remain in the family home? Must a stay-at-home parent return to the workforce? To ensure the best postdivorce adjustment and outcome, parents must set aside their own feelings and focus on their children.

Establishing the postdivorce family takes time. Parents must adjust to being single again, with children moving from home to home. Introducing children to new people and relationships can upset the family's equilibrium. By understanding more about what the typical family goes

through and how this affects children of various ages and stages, parents can ease their own anxieties and help manage their children's experience during and after the divorce.

A typical FAMILY

Jane had remained at home during the 14 years that she and Jack were married. It was only in the last six months after Jonathan, their five-year-old, entered kindergarten that she sought a part-time job outside the home. Jane's adult life had been focused on raising her four children: Jonathan, now age 5; Megan, age 8; James, age 10; and Rachel, age 13, while her husband worked long hours as a mortgage banker to support the family. Though at times Jane felt burdened by Jack's absence, she felt their marriage was stable and was shocked by Jack's announcement that he wanted a divorce.

Jane wished to remain in the family home to ensure stability for the children and suggested quitting her job until things were settled. Jack, on the other hand, felt Jane should

return to work full-time. Not only did he believe she was capable of doing so, but he did not wish to have the burden of supporting two households. Further, Jack wanted to spend more time with the children; he hoped to have them half of the time. Jack would hire a babysitter to ensure they were taken care of after school and fed dinner.

Jane felt this change was unwarranted and potentially quite difficult for the children. She also feared loss of contact with her children and not having a daily presence in their lives. These parents had to come to some decisions together so they could determine how to tell the children. Additionally, due to differences in ages, each child would require a somewhat different explanation.

First STEPS

The first few months were tumultuous for the children. Jonathan missed his father and had difficulty going to kindergarten and separating from his mother. Megan became withdrawn, and her grades declined. James was angry and started acting up at school, and Rachel was angry at her father for “ruining” their family and played a supportive role for her mother. Jane also was able to get some support from her therapist, which took some pressure off the children. She was better able to manage her own pain and to focus on the children’s needs.

With the help of a mediator, Jane and Jack were able to work out a temporary schedule for the children. Although it was not ideal in Jack’s eyes, it provided him continuing contact with the children. Jack hired a nanny, who helped with the children two afternoons a week, and where he had previously worked most weekends, he took time off to be with them. Jane remained at work and, though this was difficult, it provided her another outlet and a broader support network.

With increased contact with his dad, Jonathan’s separation anxiety diminished as did Megan’s withdrawal, but James’s anger seemed to increase, and Rachel began to refuse to go to her father’s house on weekends. Jane supported Rachel’s refusal for a brief time, until she realized that it was in everyone’s best interest to make a custody schedule work. With the help of her own therapist and a therapist for Rachel, who also met with Jane and Jack, Rachel eventually was able to stop protecting her mother emotionally and to see her father without conflicted feelings.

Jack became involved for the first time in James’s sports and, within the year, James too had adjusted to his parents’ separation. There was still work to be done to help these children maintain stability, but the parents seemed able to set aside their own feelings to help their children adjust.

How you prepare your children for the impending divorce is important and will depend on their ages, the degree to which you and your ex-spouse are able to communicate effectively, the circumstances surrounding the separation, and how much you know about what will occur in the future.

Though both parents do not necessarily need to talk

together with their child, a consistent story about the reasons for the separation is important so that the child does not feel caught in the middle. Further, the degree to which parents are able to manage their own feelings, have empathy for the child, and talk specifically about how this change will affect the child’s life is important.

Hiding marital difficulties from children may make the trauma of a separation or divorce even more difficult for them later. If separation or divorce is a real possibility, tell your children. Keep explanations simple, brief, straightforward, and tailored to each child’s needs and development. Reassure the children that they are loved by both parents. Be calm and composed and allow them to ask questions. Tell them you will have more details later. This is particularly important for older children or children of different ages. Provide as much information as you can about what will happen in the future, but recognize that it may take a while for the information to sink in and that you cannot control your child’s emotional reaction.

Preparing YOUR CHILD

- **Infants and toddlers** need to know only that their parents will live in different houses and that they will continue to have contact with each of their parents.
- **Preschool children** need simple, concrete explanations about the reasons for the separation, geared toward helping them feel more comfortable with the changes. Assure your preschooler that you both still love him or her and that the divorce is not the child’s fault.
- **School-aged children** are likely to understand something about divorce, given their level of cognitive development and their exposure to peers. At the same time, they might experience some fear that separation from a parent may also mean abandonment. Stay focused on the ways in which the divorce will affect their daily lives. Help your child understand and explore the range of their feelings, including sadness, fear, and anger. Processing reactions over time is essential to healing.
- **Older school-aged children** need more information about who is responsible for the divorce, as they are more likely to experience loyalty conflicts and have a strong sense of right and wrong. Reassure them that the separation does not change your feelings toward them. While not burdening your adolescent with a lot of details, provide the reasons for the separation and who is responsible for the decision. At the same time, spare them the details, as this will only be an emotional burden and could make them feel caught between their parents.

Prepare yourself for a reaction from your teenager. Anger and embarrassment are more likely to be expressed than sadness, which may remain beneath the surface. Your adolescent may be particularly focused on how the separation will affect his or her life. Listen to your child’s concerns and address them.

If you believe that your child's response to the divorce is interfering with his or her ability to function at school, in social relations, or day-to-day functioning, including sleep and eating patterns, consult a therapist. When choosing a therapist, look for someone who understands the dynamics of divorced families.

A child is more likely to benefit from therapy when both parents are involved in the child's treatment and provide information and insight to the therapist. At the same time, the child must feel that therapy is a safe and neutral place to express his or her feelings about the divorce. The therapist should not make recommendations to the court or take sides in any ensuing legal battle. He or she may, however, offer parents advice about handling difficult situations or suggest custody schedules that may work best for certain age groups.

Exposing children to a conflict between parents is rarely in their best interests. Work out a custody schedule with your ex-spouse and, if necessary, get help from a mediator or collaborative lawyer. Reduce as much friction as possible so that your divorce does not have a lasting negative impact on your child or adolescent.

Be particularly alert to your child's response to certain divorce-related events, such as a move from the family home, parental dating or remarriage, ongoing parental hostility, a high level of stress or poor adjustment, involving children in parental conflicts, or absence of the noncustodial parent. Monitor the child's development for changes that are more intense than expected at a given age, last longer than expected, or interfere with the child's normal growth and change. When concerns arise, consult with a mental health professional, experienced with divorce and its effect on the family, to target problems and minimize negative effects on children.

The family **REACTS**

Divorce is not a single event, but a process that moves through three phases. Initially, family members experience divorce as a crisis. Parents are vulnerable to loneliness, anger, depression, and anxiety, which may temporarily impede parenting. During the next two years, parents often begin to develop their postdivorce relationship. It is during this phase that children are most vulnerable to parental fighting and being drawn into the conflict by supporting one parent and rejecting the other.

Children also become more aware of the loss of the noncustodial parent during this phase. A child must manage his or her own feelings of loss and sadness. These feelings are usually associated with the loss of the father, who typically is the noncustodial parent, but sometimes with the loss of the mother as well, when, for example, she must begin work outside the home or engage in other new activities. As parents begin to date, children are forced to acknowledge their parents' sexuality, which can create considerable confusion.

Typically, parents are able to settle into a postdivorce rou-

tine with few difficulties within the first two years. However, ongoing hostility between parents places children at significant risk for developing psychological and behavioral problems. Additionally, a parent's remarriage may cause children to feel competitive toward stepparents, angry toward parent and stepparent for interfering with the child's fantasy that parents will one day reunite, and resentful toward a stepparent who tries to assume a parental role. A child's positive feelings toward a stepparent may also create conflict.

How children cope with divorce depends on their temperament, age, developmental ability to understand what is happening, and their emotional maturity. How parents help children negotiate these stages is of paramount importance, and the extent to which they can resolve their own feelings of hostility and anger toward each other is essential to a positive outcome for the children.

Children at different ages are affected by the divorce of their parents in different ways. Infants and toddlers are most vulnerable to changes in daily routines, hostility between parents, and the psychological disequilibrium of their parental figures.

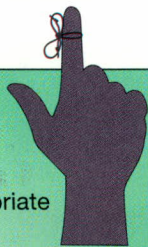
Very young children need a stable, consistent, and available parent who provides a safe and conflict-free environment. Although babies and toddlers cannot understand what parents argue about, they clearly understand the intensity of emotions and may respond with temper tantrums or regression in toileting, sleeping through the night, or feeding themselves. Emotional upset can slow developing language skills and the ability to understand what is happening in the broadest sense; it can inhibit cooperative relationships with peers.

Children may suffer an additional powerful loss if their mothers must work outside the home for the first time or return to school. Even children who had previously adjusted to a day-care provider may regress in their behavior. In response to the loss of a parent, children may experience increased separation anxiety and fearfulness. Loss of previously achieved developmental milestones, intense and unrelenting anger, or general withdrawal and apathy are all signs that an infant or toddler may be having difficulty dealing with parental separation.

Infants or toddlers are sensitive to the emotional state of their parents. By developing a support system to help themselves deal with their own anxieties, parents can insulate their children against unnecessary stress. If young toddlers' behavioral problems or developmental regressions do not resolve themselves within three months, consult a therapist and be prepared to participate in the child's treatment, as it is likely that some of the stress results from the parents' current emotional instability.

For the preschool-aged child, a predictable and stable routine is extremely important and should be maintained as much as possible after a divorce. This will require communication between parents to ensure consistency between homes. Separation from a parent can be particularly difficult

Remember...



- Give explanations using age-appropriate language.
- In answering questions, take your child's lead.
- Keep your child out of your conflict with your ex-spouse.
- Understand your children's needs based on their ages and levels of development and use these as guidelines to develop custody schedules and communicate with your ex-spouse.
- Allow your child access to both parents.
- Maintain as much consistency and stability as possible.
- If concerns arise about your child's functioning, seek professional advice.

— J. S.

for a preschooler who already may be struggling with issues of independence from his or her parents.

Ongoing anger or hostility between parents may cause preschoolers to regress in behavior or fail to attain age-appropriate development, such as toilet training, sleeping alone and through the night, improved language skills, emotional independence, and participation in activities with peers. Preschoolers are vulnerable to emotional displays, may express anger inappropriately, show an uncommon number of fears, become uneasy in social situations, or express general anxiety and sadness in response to stress.

Although a preschooler might be expected to react to his or her parents' separation, the response of a distressed child is more intense and longer lasting, and may interfere with intellectual, emotional, and/or social development. Reassure your preschooler that the divorce does not mean the loss of either parent.



As children enter school, intellectual and cognitive development allows them to understand more issues related to their parents' divorce. Not only can they more actively fantasize, but they may worry about being abandoned by their parents. Despite still holding a somewhat egocentric view of the world, they are more aware of and attuned to other people's interactions. Hostility between parents disturbs the elementary-school-aged child's sense of connectedness.

These children experience divorce as a profound loss on a variety of levels. They become increasingly fearful of what may happen when their parents fight or argue. They may feel unimportant to the parent who must return to work or school, and they may withdraw from pleasurable activities, show no interest in school, and become increas-

ingly worried and depressed. They may deal with their feelings by becoming angry, aggressive, or very attentive to the distressed parent.

At this age, sadness is the most common reaction to divorce. Girls, in particular, may become tearful or withdrawn, and may lack self-esteem. In boys, sadness may be expressed more easily as anger at parents, siblings, or peers. Their fears also may be atypical for their ages, such as a fear of being left alone or kidnapped or having a parent injured.

In later elementary years, children are apt to experience internal conflicts about the divorce. School-aged children feel a need to take sides. They tend to hide their feelings, making it more difficult to see that they are distressed. They may appear more emotionally detached from the divorce. Girls may become more solicitous at home and at school, whereas boys are apt to experience increased aggression and academic problems.

The school-aged child also is more likely to be drawn into parental conflict, asked to take sides, or to reject one

Children may suffer an additional powerful loss if their mothers must work outside the home for the first time or return to school

parent. This only adds to the child's feelings of conflicted loyalties, guilt, shame, and anger. Children may complain of aches and pains, withdraw socially, or wish to spend an inordinate amount of time with the custodial parent. They also may have angry outbursts for no apparent reason. As with younger groups, be alert to the intensity and duration of symptoms and the degree to which they interfere with normal development.

For adolescents, normal developmental tasks often resonate with the issues these teenagers must confront as their parents divorce. Although teens are dealing with emancipation from the family during this stage, a divorce often thrusts them out of the family before they are ready. Parents who are dealing with their own sadness and anxiety may not have the energy to tolerate or help the adolescent negotiate his or her own separation.

As a result of the divorce, adolescents must confront new and complex views of their parents before they may be cognitively or emotionally able to do so. Due to their own egocentric view, they often blame themselves for the divorce, feel guilty about it, and are especially vulnerable to parental needs for loyalty. Choosing sides may be a simpler solution than managing the differences between their parents or the hostilities that they experience. Given the emergence of the adolescent's own sexuality, dealing with parental dating or remarriage also is quite challenging.

For boys, a lack of a male role model may cause difficulty in school, in controlling aggression, and in appropriate expression of competitive drives. For girls, emotional separation from a mother becomes even more difficult, particularly if they have little interaction with their fathers.

Sometimes distinguishing between normal rebellion and the frequent mood swings of adolescence versus reaction to a divorce is difficult. An adolescent is probably distressed and in need of help if academic performance is compromised, relationships with peers are suffering, or the teen has gotten into trouble or placed themselves in dangerous situations. Drug or alcohol abuse, sexual acting out, or physical aggression can signal the adolescent's distress.

Teenagers can become depressed in response to the strain of parental separation. Take seriously depressive feelings that do not resolve themselves or expressions of suicidal thoughts or behavior. Additionally, if the adolescent's crisis continues long after the family has stabilized postdivorce, consider consulting with a mental health professional. Adolescents also can be challenged by a parent's new relationship; a move to a new home; or unrelenting, ongoing anger and conflict between the parents.

There also is stress for single parents, including shrinking economic resources, which results in restricted educational and extracurricular activities for children or a move to a new home and, as a result, transfer to a new school. A parent's emotional reliance on a child may result in an overly close, enmeshed relationship that will make it more difficult for the child to separate and develop age-appropriate independent skills.

How parents cope and manage their anger toward each other is just as important as understanding what their children need during the divorce. Exposing children to conflict, insisting that the child take sides, or prolonged custody battles can cause undue stress for the child. Parents, such as Jack and Jane, who are able to manage their own feelings without exposing their children to anger or sadness are in the best position to help and understand their children's response to the divorce. **FA**

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Through the Eyes of Children

Healing stories about divorce

BY

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Children typically suffer pain, confusion, and insecurity when their parents separate. They are hurt by outbursts of anger, bitterness, a lack of respect, an inability to communicate, and the overt hostility that can repeatedly flare up between battling parents. Despite all the obvious signs that their parents' relationship has irretrievably broken apart, most children secretly harbor—sometimes for years—fantasies that their parents might reconcile. At least, they want their parents to be friends.

Family members, counselors, teachers, and other caretakers are profoundly concerned about how best to respond to children's pain, how to communicate with them, and how to help heal their emotional hurt, especially in the more difficult, high-conflict family situations. We have found that simple stories can help children understand and cope with parental separation and the fallout from their parents' conflict.

Therapists, parents, or anyone else who cares about the child can construct stories tailored to each child's individual needs and fears. The storyteller should understand the family experience from the child's point of view and attempt to address and experience the child's deepest concerns. (See "The Turtle Story," page 11.)

Children very much want to believe that their parents once loved each other and that they were born out of love and hope and good expectations for a happy family. They

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