

## **GROWING UP GREAT! Series developed by Dr. LORI RAPPAPORT**

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### **UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO DIVORCE**

The biggest concern for most parents when they consider divorce is whether their children will be hurt by the breakup. In addition to feeling angry and distressed at the breakup of their marriage, parents also feel guilty about breaking up the family and inadequate with regard to how to explain, comfort, reassure and help their child through the divorce process.

When a child's parents become divorced, it makes them more vulnerable to developing a wide variety of social, behavioral, emotional, and academic problems. For some children, these difficulties are short-lived and within one to two years after the separation, they are able to pull themselves together and move on. For others however, the road to becoming well-adjusted is longer and paved with obstacles. What factors make the adjustment more difficult for these children, and how parents can help to facilitate the smoothest transition for their children during this time is the aim of this newsletter.

### **PARENTAL CONFLICT**

There exists a tremendous amount of research on children of divorce showing that the most poorly adjusted children are those whose parents are in continuing conflict. These are the children who are caught in the middle as their parent's battle and criticize each other in front of them, and fight *through* them. Conflict between parents is the most serious stressor a child faces during a parental divorce. Too often, parents are so caught up in their hurt and angry feelings toward their former spouse that they are not aware of how their attitude, thoughts and feelings are conveyed to their children. Angry attempts to punish a former spouse by disrupting their relationship with their children and undermining their authority as a parent are quite common. While this may in fact be accomplished, ultimately it is the children who stand to lose the most. Children are frightened when they see their parents shout at, belittle, and threaten each other. They worry about the well-being and safety of both of their parents and do not feel secure as long as this remains the case. As a result, they suffer a myriad of symptoms, most notably low self-esteem, anxiety, sleep difficulties and insecurity of attachments.

Divorcing parents are faced with an extremely challenging task. They must continue to work together, communicate and resolve conflicts over the most important things in their lives—their children—while they may distrust, fear or even hate one another. Relationships are different. How someone is as a spouse does not always translate to how they are as a parent. While it is not necessary for parents to pretend to their children that they have positive feelings for their former spouse, it is important that they support one another in their role as a parent, and *allow for their child to feel positively toward that parent*. Comments such as “Your father is a jerk” or “Your mother doesn't know what she is doing, don't listen to her” are very destructive. Children identify so closely with their parents that criticism about a parent is experienced as criticism of themselves. They react to these criticisms as if they were directed toward them. It is in the children's best interest to have a good relationship with both parents, rather than watching one parent devalue the role of the other. Therefore, both parents should convey to their children that although they do not live together, the other parent is still their parent and should be respected and obeyed.

Divorcing parents need to work out a system for handling conflict, which does not include nor is within earshot of their children. Divorced parents will be continually presented with joint decisions to make about their child's life and must learn how to structure such discussions and negotiations in an effective and civil manner. As parents work at reducing conflict between themselves and controlling their own emotional and verbal behaviors regarding their former spouse, they will notice an increase in the sense of safety and security in their children. Parents who are unable to avoid open conflict in front of their children should seek professional assistance. Sometimes otherwise healthy children need a neutral professional 3<sup>rd</sup> party to process their feelings/situations with when parents cannot peacefully co-parent and provide continuity in their child's life.

## **ADJUSTMENT TO DIVORCE**

Almost all children are very upset by divorce. Most do not understand what is happening, even though they may know other children who have gone through a divorce. Because the divorce process takes several years, we see a variety of reactions common in children at various points along the way. Initially, most are frightened as they watch their lives become disrupted and in many cases their parents behave irrationally. As mentioned previously, it is very detrimental for children to witness intense parental conflict. Separating parents can do much for their children by protecting them from such scenes.

Overall, children adjust best to divorce when they have more stability in their lives and fewer pressures to deal with. Parents can facilitate their child's adjustment by providing as much continuity, familiarity and predictability in their lives as possible. Parents should try to keep as many things as possible constant in their child's life. This includes such things as school, childcare, friends, bedroom, extracurricular activities and schedule. Children adjust better when there is more structure and routine, and consistency in limits and consequences across both households. This requires parents to co-parent, albeit separately, to provide as much stability and consistency as possible given the realities of joint custody.

Dependable, regularly scheduled contact with both parents is important, as children already feel frightened with regard to the loss of their parents. They fear that their parents may not be available when they need them, that they may not continue to love them, and that they may even leave or abandon them. This is not an irrational fear from a child's perspective, as they have already likely seen one of their parents pack a bag and leave without little preparation or warning. What is to stop his other parent from doing the same?

While children share some common experiences as a result of divorce, reactions to divorce and their resulting adjustment differ based on the age and gender of the child.

## **INFANTS AND TODDLER**

Separation is a strong theme in the lives of all infants and toddlers. They tend to become distressed when their parent leaves to go to work, out to get the mail, or even to another room. Very young children worry about being separated from their parents for long periods of time, even when they are in the hands of a familiar caregiver. Following a marital separation, many mothers find themselves having to return to work or increase their hours, a change which may be very stressful for an infant or toddler. This change, coupled with possibly new day-care and baby-sitting arrangements and changes in scheduling can disrupt the flow of a child's early development.

One basic and fundamental need of very young children is the need to experience a sense

of predictability and safety. When a child's daily routines become disrupted and unpredictable, when he is unsure who will be caring for him on any given afternoon, or when he will see either parent next and for how long, it is almost impossible for him to feel safe and secure. Very young children have no way to understand why their lives feel so unpredictable, confusing and perhaps even frightening at times. They have no way to anticipate what will happen next, and so they become frightened and anxious.

Most parents in the process of separation understand the importance of predictable schedules, and consistent childcare arrangements. However, many are unaware of how devastating continued conflict among spouses is to infants and toddlers. Many assume that since they are unable to understand the meaning of the arguments they will be unaffected by the fighting. This is untrue, for while infants and toddlers may not understand the words, they are quite aware of the emotions being felt and expressed and are frightened by them.

Temperament or a child's "disposition" has been found to have a significant influence on the child's adjustment to stressful situations. Children who have an "easy" disposition are better able to adapt to changes in their environment, and at times even seem to enjoy them. In contrast, children with a more "difficult" temperament become easily distressed when they encounter changes, or are subject to shouting or emotional outbursts between parents.

**Recognizing distress in infants and toddlers.** There are certain behaviors or "signs" to look for in very young children which signal that the child is in distress psychologically. The most common one is a **loss of developmental accomplishments**, referred to by professionals as "regression." This might be for example, a child previously toilet-trained begins having many accidents; a child who slept through the night undisturbed currently wakes 2-3 times a night; a 12-month old who was cruising furniture and taking a few steps now only crawls; or a two-year-old who once played happily on his own in the family room now cries and clings to his mother when she attempts to go to the bathroom or prepare dinner.

**Emotional reactivity** or responding to situations with emotions that are out of proportion is another sign of distress in very young children. An example of this might be the six-month old who used to love taking a bath now cries for no apparent reason. **Anger** (most notably when their needs are frustrated), **fearfulness** (beyond typical separation situations) and **withdrawal** (loss of interest in previously enjoyed people, activities or toys) are additional signs to look for which may indicate psychological distress in infants and toddlers.

## **PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

In order to fully understand the impact of divorce on the preschooler, one must keep in mind their cognitive development. Preschool children think in egocentric terms, that is, they believe things happen because of them. As a result, it is not unusual for a child to believe that his parent's anger, sadness or even the divorce is their fault. Parents need to be aware of this pattern of thinking and consistently reinforce to the child that what is going on around him is neither his fault, nor changes how his parents feel about him.

Another characteristic of preschool cognitive development is the increase in imagination. In fact, it is common at this stage for many children to have difficulties distinguishing fantasy from reality. As children try to make sense of what is going on around them, they may develop fantasies, which frighten them and make them sad. An example of this might be fears of abandonment by a parent, that their parent does not love them anymore, or that the break-up of the family is due to his bad behavior or angry thoughts. Open communication and consistent reassurance will help a child to feel more secure.

The preschool years are a time for increased independence from parents, often with the beginning of some type of structured classroom experience. Children who feel secure and positive in their attachments with their parents and have stable and consistent home environments are the most successful in making the transition to new environments and establishing relationships with peers and other caregivers. For children whose parents separate once they have already been attending preschool/daycare, it is extremely important for them to continue with the same arrangement. The predictability and familiarity of the daily activities and social interactions will provide a sense of stability and continuity in a preschooler's life when their home environment is less secure.

As with infants and toddlers, hostilities between parents are a significant source of stress for preschool children. Because they are more advanced cognitively, they are more aware and more sensitive to open conflict between parents. Their interpretations of events seem to be much more exaggerated and significant than those of their parents. For example, a nasty comment made by one parent to another is interpreted by the preschool child as a "big fight." Preschool children are not only devastated by witnessing shouting matches, verbal threats or physical aggression among parents but is left with trying to understand the meaning of what was said and then his own fantasies of what will happen next. For children this age, the fantasy of what they imagine might possibly happen in the future is almost always far worse than reality.

**Recognizing distress in preschoolers.** It is typically easier to recognize distress in preschoolers as compared to infants and toddlers as they have verbal skills and are more likely to express their feelings or concerns. Even so, many preschoolers express distress behaviorally. Similarly, to infants and toddlers, a distressed preschooler might display a **loss of developmental accomplishments**. Specific areas of such behavioral regressions include: loss of language or using "baby talk", wetting or soiling instead of using the toilet; crying or clinging excessively; or refusing to participate in activities with peers.

Preschoolers who are experiencing stress may **fail to progress** or achieve expected developmental milestones. This would include the four-and-a-half-year-old who has never been toilet-trained; a five-year-old who has never been able to take turns; or a four-year-old who has always slept in bed with his parents. Probably the most common indicator of distress in preschool children is the display of **anger**. This includes physical aggression (hitting, pinching, kicking and spitting), as well as verbal aggression. **Fear** (particularly in situations where he was previously comfortable), **sadness**, **withdrawal**, and **general anxiety** are also indicators of psychological distress.

## **EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Children between the ages of six and eight have developed the capacity for abstract thinking. As a result, they typically develop frightening fantasies of what could happen following divorce, such as being abandoned by their remaining parent. Given their age, they are more likely to adapt to joint physical custody arrangements, and to tolerate the separations from each parent easier than the preschool child. Simple explanations of what divorce is and why it is happening is important for these children, for while they may have the capacity for abstract thinking, they tend to view the divorce in egocentric terms ("because of them") not unlike the preschooler.

The early elementary school years are a time for increased emotional independence. However, children depend a great deal upon their parents for feelings of safety, security and positive self-esteem. A separation or divorce disturbs the child's overall sense of

family and may cause him to feel like he has lost his niche in the world. When parents openly express conflict and hostility in front of them, it undermines their sense of safety and overall wellbeing. They typically respond with feelings of sadness and are vulnerable to frightening fantasies of abandonment and guilt.

During the preschool years, children usually become quite attached to their fathers and it is this relationship which is most commonly disrupted by divorce. Weekend and overnight visits change the relationship from every day, brief, spontaneous interactions to more planned, structured time together. It is a challenge for fathers to remain centrally involved in their child's day-to-day activities rather than falling into the role of the "Disneyland Dad."

A major source of stress for young children is having a parent unable to maintain their emotional stability. Parents who are experiencing their own distress are less available to provide for their child's everyday needs, both psychological and physical. More importantly, a distressed parent may begin to turn to their child for help and support. Children are quick to come to the aid of their parents, for it makes them feel important, well-loved and needed. However, as satisfying as it is to feel important, these children want desperately to return their parent to their previously healthier level of functioning, so that they can begin to provide praise and support to them once again.

**Recognizing distress in early elementary school children.** Early elementary school children may experience similar symptoms of distress as observed in preschoolers such as the loss of developmental accomplishments or the failure to achieve them. However, there are several signs that are especially common among them. Probably the most common reaction is **sadness**. Children display sadness in obvious ways such as by crying, looking sad and saying they feel sad, as well as becoming overly quiet or denying feelings of sadness. But they also sometimes withdraw, become irritable and angry as result, if not addressed soon enough, can become depression.

**Depressive reactions** are also a typical response to divorce. Children who are depressed are more than just sad about the break-up of their family, but feel badly about everything, finding little happiness in their lives. Their sadness interferes with their ability to do schoolwork, makes them uninterested in their usual activities or playing with peers, and eats away at their self-esteem, often leaving them with a poor self-image and dislike for themselves.

**Anger** is another common reaction, typically expressed toward a classmate or friend, or toward a parent in the form of whining, complaining, and uncooperative behavior. General anxiety is also notable in behaviors such as hair twirling or pulling, fingernail biting, facial tics or fears of separation including overnights at a friend's house. The signs of distress just mentioned in contrast to those described for infants, toddlers and preschool children are not typical behaviors as a result of the normal peaks and valleys of childhood development. Thus, they are almost always a sign of stress and should be immediately addressed by the child's parent.

## **LATER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Children between the ages of nine and twelve usually have a realistic understanding of the divorce. Like younger elementary school children, they too have frightening fantasies and often blame themselves for the break-up of their parents. Sometimes, if parents had been openly fighting in front of them, they may have worried about or even wished their parents might get a divorce. When that happens, magical thinking creates the thought that they are to blame. Children this age are also capable of more sophisticated interpersonal relationships and therefore

experience many internal conflicts. It is not unusual for these children to feel divided between parents, especially when one or both parents attempt to get that child “on their side” against the other.

Older elementary school age children often appear as though they are coping remarkably well with their parents’ divorce. They seem to be emotionally detached from the divorce process, involved with their schoolwork, friends and activities. This may be true—at first. Yet parents should not be too quick to accept their seemingly easy adjustment, for this cheerful demeanor is the hallmark of the preadolescent. The inner stress and pain experienced by these children is far too much to handle and so they develop strong defenses to protect themselves. They become so good at masking their inner turmoil that it is often extremely difficult for parents or others around them to understand what thoughts and feelings lay beneath the surface. When the preadolescent realizes the permanency of the situation (that is it not a sprint but a marathon), they often start to unravel. Typically this may be once everyone around them, including their parents, are settling in and feeling more adjusted to the changes.

The cognitive, emotional and social maturity of the preadolescent may be in certain ways a disadvantage to them in the divorce process. Many children, particularly girls, are looked on by parents to help with the stresses of running a single household. They may be looked on to provide assistance with laundry, cooking, childcare and even emotional support. These children are usually eager to please their parents and have great concern for their well-being. However, they are also burdened by this role, which often interferes with their ability to carry out their normal activities and responsibilities and the tasks associated with their growing up.

Older elementary school children are also affected by continued conflict between their parents. It is not unusual for these children to be “caught between” both parents, feeling as though they must take sides. Sometimes they are cast into the role of the “spy” to bring back information on the other parent, or to act as a “messenger” between two hostile parents. The emotional cost to these children is extremely high, as they experience loyalty conflicts and guilt and shame if they betray one or both parents.

**Recognizing distress in later elementary school children.** As mentioned previously, children at this age display their distress in ways that do make them appear vulnerable. If they do show distress, they will usually displace it, directing it toward someone or something else.

**Anger** is the most common reaction of this age group, especially for boys. It can be expressed physically, verbally or in more indirect ways such as day-to-day conflicts over food, dress or scheduling. Too often parents do not equate this displaced anger as a result of their reaction to the divorce, and view them as hostile and out of control.

**Somatic complaints**, most commonly headaches and stomachaches, are another common sign of distress in children of this age. While it may seem at times that children are making this up or exaggerating them, they can be real and very painful, exacerbated by the stress they are holding inside. Social withdrawal is another way children show distress. They may withdraw from activities, family, and friends, or they may withdraw from peers but become increasingly close to their custodial parent, wanting to spend all their free time with them.

## **ADOLESCENTS**

Adolescents often adjust better to the family disruption associated with separation and divorce than younger children. This is because they are in the process of becoming more

independent and are more involved with their own plans and future. However, despite their growing independence they still very much need their parents. Yet they often find their parents have less time, energy and emotional resources to offer them and leave them more “on their own” than they desire.

It is important to recognize that going through adolescence is already a challenging process to the average child from an intact family. Adolescents experiencing a parental divorce have that plus an array of other changes to contend with. Initially many feel shocked and betrayed by the divorce. It is likely that they have lived with years of marital conflict and have accepted that this was part of everyday life. To them it seems unthinkable that their parents will divorce. The surprise is usually followed by sadness and a disappointment in their parents for not being able to keep the family together.

Like older school-aged children, adolescents are also likely to have problems when they are pulled into loyalty conflicts and feel as though they have to take sides with one parent or the other. During the teenage years, children begin to modify their views of their parents, from idealizing them to recognizing their limitations and faults as real people. Negative and hostile comments made by one parent to another may make the adolescent view both parents in a different way, one that may be more bitter and demeaning. Often, the adolescent loses respect for one or both parents, particularly when they share negative information about the other parent, regardless of whether it is “true.”

Because adolescents are focused on their future, they often worry how the failure of their parent’s marriage will influence their own ability to have a good marriage. Given the financial strains of setting up two households, adolescents also worry about the availability of financial resources for them to go to college.

**Recognizing distress in adolescents.** It is often difficult to recognize distress in adolescents, as many of the emotional mood swings, rebelliousness, and behavioral difficulties are common during this period of development. As compared to younger children, adolescents are much more capable of expressing their feelings and do so in ways other than verbally such as the use of drugs, alcohol, engaging in sexual activity, aggressive behavior toward themselves or others, getting into trouble with the law, or running away from home. These are all red flags, which do not necessarily mean that the adolescent is in serious distress, but warrants further attention from parents. There is no clear line between the normal limits of adolescent behavior and what constitutes distress (e.g., alcohol abuse vs. occasional use).

**Anger** is probably the most common emotion expressed by teenagers, toward parents, siblings or friends. It is not unusual to see physical fighting, destruction of property and verbal hostility. Substance abuse and delinquent acts such as stealing or skipping school are frequently the result of underlying anger. Similarly to younger children, some adolescents express their distress through **somatic complaints**.

**Depression** is also common during adolescence, and its symptoms include irritability, worthlessness, depressed mood, difficulty concentrating in school, poor appetite (or overeating), insomnia (or too much sleep) and/or constant fatigue. Thoughts of suicide or actual self-injurious behaviors (cutting) are also a symptom of depression. Depressive symptoms should be brought immediately to the attention of a mental health professional, as it is a myth that adolescents who express suicidal thoughts or intent are just “crying out for attention.” The most serious complication of depression is death.

## PARENTAL COOPERATION

It is often difficult for angry former spouses to work together and support each other as parents. However, it is necessary for both to realize that although they no longer choose to remain a couple, they will be forever linked together in so much as they raise their children together. With the children's best interests at the forefront, there are three points emphasized by Teyber (1992), which are essential for parents to keep in mind when interacting with their former spouse regarding the welfare of their children:

1. Each parent must support the other's parental role and not undermine the former spouse's authority with the children.
2. Parents must not expose the children to parental fighting or embroil them in parental conflicts.
3. Parents must not make children choose between them, but should encourage them to be close to both parents at the same time.

In addition, parents should encourage others to take a neutral stance regarding the divorce, including grandparents, teachers and other significant adults. Children need to be able to receive support from these people without their taking sides or blaming one parent or the other.

Finally, do not be afraid to seek the assistance of a mental health professional. Just as the legal component of the divorce process often requires the assistance of an attorney or mediator, the emotional component may benefit from the assistance of a psychologist or counselor who can offer not only personal emotional support, but provide useful resources, tools, developmental information and parent guidance to *help you to help your children* get through the divorce as smoothly as possible.

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