

Children and Divorce

One out of every two marriages today ends in divorce and many divorcing families include children. Parents who are getting a divorce are frequently worried about the effect the divorce will have on their children. During this difficult period, parents may be preoccupied with their own problems, however, they continue to be the most important people in their children's lives. While parents may be devastated or relieved by the divorce, children are invariably frightened and confused by the threat to their security. Some parents feel so hurt or overwhelmed by the divorce that they may turn to the child for comfort or direction.

Divorce can be misinterpreted by children unless parents tell them what is happening, how they are involved and not involved and what will happen to them. Children often believe they have caused the conflict between their mother and father. Many children assume the responsibility for bringing their parents back together, sometimes by sacrificing themselves. Vulnerability to both physical and mental illnesses can originate in the traumatic loss of one or both parents through divorce. With care and attention, however, a family's strengths can be mobilized during a divorce, and children can be helped to deal constructively with the resolution of parental conflict. Parents should be alert to signs of distress in their child or children.

Young children may react to divorce by becoming more aggressive and uncooperative or withdrawing. Older children may feel deep sadness and loss. Their schoolwork may suffer and behavior problems are common.

As teenagers and adults, children of divorce often have trouble with their own relationships and experience problems with self-esteem. Children will do best if they know that their mother and father will still be their parents and remain involved with them even though the marriage is ending and the parents won't live together. Long custody disputes or pressure on a child to "choose sides" can be particularly harmful for the youngster and can add to the damage of the divorce.

Research shows that children do best when parents can cooperate on behalf of the child. Parents' ongoing commitment to the child's well-being is vital. If a child shows signs of distress, the family doctor or pediatrician can refer the parents to a child and adolescent psychiatrist for evaluation and treatment. In addition, the child and adolescent psychiatrist can meet with the parents to help them learn how to make the strain of the divorce easier on the entire family. Psychotherapy for the children of a divorce, and the divorcing parents, can be helpful.