



divorce and children

Caroline Dale – Good Grief Ltd

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Time surrounding divorce is usually thick with emotional stress, psychological confusion, relationship strain and life upheaval for both children and their parents. In the lead up to parental separation, home life is usually fraught with conflict and tension.

Children may feel some guilt over their parent separation, or may focus their blame on just one parent. The relationship between children and their non-residential parent – often the father – can grow distant. Their relationship with the residential parent may become strained as the parent struggles with new pressures and their own burdens.

Most children do adjust adequately to the dramatic changes in their lives; on average, children of divorced parents rate only slightly lower on measures of mental health than those whose parents are still together. (1.)

Research indicates that the first 2-3 years following the divorce are the hardest for children, but that the impact continues to be felt through their youth and young adulthood.

Here is a general guide to understanding and supporting school aged children and adolescents through their parents separation:



1. Haggerty, Robert J. (1996) Stress, risk and resilience in children and adolescents: processes, mechanisms and interventions. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge UK.

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Age	How they might react?	What can we do?
<p>Primary</p> <p>Children begin to understand what divorce means. They believe that their parents don't love each other and know they won't be living together any longer.</p>	<p>Children may feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * deceived * an acute sense of loss for the parent who moved away. * hope that their parent will reunite * rejected be the absent parent * become depressed, show changes in eating and sleeping, lack of interest in life, poor concentration, crying, irritability and withdrawal, or a sense of hopelessness. * fear or abandonment, or may worry about their parents' future wellbeing as well as their won. * fear of not being picked up on time by noncustodial parent. * show symptoms of physical illness. * become extremely angry with both parents about the divorce. * direct their anger outwards eg challenging behaviour, or inward eg feeling of shame or self-blame. 	<p>We can</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * encourage children to talk about the divorce. * be sensitive to signs of depression, fear and troubled behaviour. Know who to turn to if we believe professional help is needed. * help children feel that life will be ok and that their world is secure. * encourage parents to talk to other adults, not their child, about adult problems such a money issues, unresolved feelings, work stress etc. * ensure that the child's teacher is aware of the situation. The teacher can provide support and watch for signs that the child may need additional help.
<p>Preteens and Adolescents</p> <p>They understand, but often do not accept separation or divorce.</p>	<p>Preteens and teens may</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * become very angry * feel disillusioned, betrayed, or rejected by one or both of their parents. They may lose trust in relationships in general. * may lose self-esteem or worry about being loved. * be highly moralistic and critical, may judge their parents' decision to divorce harshly. * be embarrassed or disturbed by any change in their parents' sexual behaviour. * become more intense in the risk taking and rebellion that is normal at this stage – shoplifting, using drugs, becoming sexually active, skipping school etc. * become depressed or withdrawn, or ay threaten suicide. * may behave much better, not worse, feeling that if their behaviour improves they can save their parent's marriage. * may find their sense of independence disrupted. They may be afraid to separate from their parents or feeling a strong need to align with one parent. 	<p>We can</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * give them time to discuss their feelings. We can suggest positive ways to handle feelings. If children have difficulty talking with their parents, encourage them to confide in another trusted adult such as a relative, family friend, teacher or guidance counsellor. * maintain established routines as much as possible. * emphasise that although the family may be changing, they must continue to show respect for both parents, must follow house rules, must do their best in school etc. * reassure them that they are not responsible for their parents' happiness and that they do not need to become the 'man' or the 'woman' of the house in the absence of their father or mother.

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