

How Children Feel

Divorce is painful for children. The effects of divorce vary with children's ages and depend on the circumstances surrounding the divorce. While every child is different and may react in different ways to divorce, there are some common reactions by age group that parents may see.

YOUNG CHILDREN

Preschool children live in a small world mostly made up of parents and family. They have not had many experiences. They react to what is happening in an emotional way and cannot understand the divorce on an intellectual level. Divorce is confusing and preschool children may be afraid that they will be abandoned or have nowhere to live. They cry, cling, or become demanding. They may blame themselves for the divorce and feel guilty.

ELEMENTARY AGE CHILDREN

Children of ages 5-12 are expanding their world to include peers and school rather than just family. They react to what is happening by thinking about it and questioning. They worry about many things and believe in living by rules and that life is fair. Children may respond by feeling abandoned and insecure. Because of the loss of one parent, they fear that something will happen to the parent with whom they live most of the time. Problems at school and with friends may surface. Younger children in this age group often feel very sad at the breakup of the family while the older children may have deep anger.

YOUNG TEENAGERS

Young teenagers are in a stage where they are going through rapid physical, social, and emotional growth. Often they are confused, moody and feel insecure. At times they may act like a little child by clinging or being demanding to parents. Other times they reject parents and attach to friends. When parents divorce, early adolescents have more stress, which may result in their feeling rejected and ashamed or angry with their parents to camouflage their sense of vulnerability. Problems with sleeping, health, school or friends may arise. When parents vie for their allegiance, loyalty conflicts result in guilt, depression and despair.

OLDER TEENAGERS

This stage may be stormiest for the parent and child relationships. Older teenagers are trying on different roles and in the process of establishing their identities. Divorce may make teenager feel hurried to achieve independence when they aren't ready, and they become overwhelmed by unsolvable problems and feelings of incompetence. Teenagers may test their parents' concern for them. This age group may become preoccupied with the survival of relationships and mourn the loss of the family of their childhood. They feel embarrassed and resentful toward parents who are perceived as giving their own needs priority.

The following chart presents common reactions of children to divorce in broad terms. Some reactions may overlap age groups. Research is just beginning about the long-range effects of divorce.

AGE GROUP & COMMON REACTIONS

BABIES AND TODDLERS

Trouble sleeping
Afraid to leave parent
Clinging
Crankiness
Slowing down in learning new skills

CHILDREN, AGES 3-5 YEARS

Blame selves for divorce and feel guilty
Confusion
Fear of abandonment
Aggression, temper tantrums
Return to security items
Lapses in toilet training
Try to convince selves all is OK
Emotionally needy

CHILDREN, AGES 6-8 YEARS

Sadness
Crying and sobbing
Feel abandoned and rejected
Loyalty conflicts
Sense of helplessness
Hope parents reconcile
Anger

**CHILDREN,
AGES 9-12 YEARS**

Deep anger

Physical complaints

Sense of loss

Shame

Resentment

Fear of loneliness

Divided loyalties--anger toward parent they blame for the divorce

TEENAGERS

Feelings of betrayal

Anger

Embarrassment

Resentment

Hard to concentrate

Chronic fatigue

May feel hurried to achieve independence

May be overly dependent

May test parents' concern for them

May align with one parent

Worry about survival of relationships

Money worries