

## **Divorce and Children**

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Divorce continues to waiver between 50 & 60% of all marriages. Unfortunately, many divorces also involve children. Much has been written and speculated about the effect that divorce has on children, both long and short term. When it comes to children handling divorce, what is myth and what is reality? Is divorce always a detrimental experience for children? Does their age matter? What can parents do to help ease the process for children?

The bad news is that divorce is rarely pleasant or easy to get through. The good news is that there are things parents can do to help children through divorce. It is not inevitable that a child be scarred for life or act out excessively just by virtue of going through a divorce.

Age does matter in terms of how a child copes with divorce. For example, young children tend to blame themselves whereas older teenagers may doubt their own ability to have lasting relationships.

It is key that each parent respect the children's right to love both of their parents. While simply stated, this is often overlooked as parents seek to "get back" at the other parent. They do this by attempting to turn the children against the other parent. This is one of the most damaging things parents do during divorce. It usually backfires in that the children grow to resent the parent who is attempting to turn them against the other parent.

Often times divorcing parents will say they need to "educate" their children about the divorce or what the other parent did to cause the divorce. Not true. This is a case of the parents putting their own needs before their child's. The most common wish of children of divorce (after mom and dad getting back together) is that they not be put in the middle and be made to choose between parents. Until the teenage years, children have very little concept of what marriage entails or what role sex has in that relationship. Parents who try to explain the other parent's shortcoming or reason for failure of the marriage usually end up alienating the child even farther. Even if a child asks, parents are wise to avoid this question.

Parents do not want to use their children as sounding boards or confidants, regardless of the child's age. Divorce is a very stressful time for parents and it is only natural that they should seek more support at this time. But use appropriate means – family, friends, clergy person or counselor – not the children.

Do not expect children to move on your time line of adjustment or be accepting of new dating partners. There's really no reason to involve children in your dating life unless the relationship becomes serious. Even then, children often express great loyalty struggles in accepting their parents' new partners. On the other hand, when your ex spouse begins dating, allow your children to like that person. Even if the marriage ended because of an affair, you ruining your children's relationship with their other parent will not ease your pain.

Finally and most important, keep the rules intact. Many divorcing parents cut back on rules and structure because they believe that the children have been through a tough time and need a break. Actually, the best thing for the children is structure and routine. Their image of reality and what they assumed would last forever was just destroyed. Doing away with rules just adds to the confusion and usually results in even more acting out.

Divorce is never easy. If you keep these principles in mind, you are well on your way toward eliminating unnecessary pain while going through this transition.