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Children's Reactions to Separation

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How to Help Them Cope

When a dissolution takes place in a family, and there are children involved, it's not easy on them to deal with the situation. Children are often very resilient and perceptive, but in order for them to cope with their parents' separation in a healthy way, they need your help, your time, and especially – your willingness to have discussions.

Most children can't understand or accept adults' reasons for separation – after all they're expecting their parents to “live happily ever after”. For some children, especially younger ones, it is possible that their idea is that mommies and daddies live together, even though there are others kids at school who have separated parents.

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Children's Reactions to Separation

Depending on their age, emotional maturity, and personality, children and teenagers express themselves differently. In younger children, it is common to see regression, such as wetting the bed, or refusing to sleep alone. A prevailing reaction for teens is to become more withdrawn and have lower grades at school.

Most children and teenagers express the fear of losing their parents' love and feelings of

abandonment – even if both parents make the best effort to be present in the children's everyday life.

Symptoms to Watch out for

Some of the most common symptoms of psychological pain and distress over divorce can be:

- Crying more often and asking for a parent before bedtime
- Being afraid to sleep alone or bed-wetting
- Acting out in school
- Seeking attention, throwing tantrums
- Being sad and withdrawn, avoiding to play with other children
- Testing you to see if you're not leaving them as well
- Expressing anger towards one parent and refusing to speak to them in person, or on the phone
- Being distracted at school and getting lower grades

Helping Your Child

Your child's reactions may seem foreign to you, which could be exasperating, but remember that divorce is a new concept for your child to become acquainted with. One of the worst things parents can do, is jump to negative conclusions at their children's reactions, and punish or yell. Your child needs love, support and understanding, so do your best to apply the tips described below.

Talk to Them

Let them ask the difficult questions. And try to answer in a sincere, age-appropriate manner, without placing blame either on yourself or their other parent. Give your children time and space to talk. Remember that while you shouldn't be too harsh, giving them false hope could only fuel the fantasy of the parents getting back together.

Let Them Express Their Emotions

Your children may feel fear, anger, confusion, doubt and will probably have questions. After

you let your children express their emotions freely, help them learn how to deal with those feelings in a healthy way. For instance, they may be angry at their father/mother for leaving home, but that doesn't make it alright to punch a classmate. Help your children channel their emotions into something productive, such as art or sports.

Express Your Emotions, but Don't Make Your Children Your Confidants

It's important for a child to know that it's not easy on you either. Besides, you have the great advantage of being able to demonstrate to your children how to deal with emotions in a healthy way, and lead by example. However, if you're still feeling too emotional or angry, it's best to only talk to your children when you can remain calm.

Be Tolerant

Being a bit more tolerant doesn't mean you're throwing all rules out the window. However, it does mean you'll talk to your children and try to understand where their behavior is coming from. A common mistake that parents make is to jump to punishment over the children's wrongdoings. Instead, listen first, ask questions, without interrogating, try to put yourself in their shoes and then explain why that behaviour cannot be tolerated. Being tolerant doesn't mean accommodating your child's inappropriate behaviour, but rather making the effort to listen to them, instead of just talk.

Prevent Conflict Between Your Children and Your Ex

It is excruciating for children to be in the middle of their parents' fights. Moreover, it is important for your children to understand that despite you no longer being a couple, you'll always remain their parents. Also, it's quite unfair to ask a child to take sides. They are on both sides!

Encourage Conversation with Other Children of Separated Parents

It's important for children to know that they are not alone in what they are going through. Having a friend the same age, who understands the problem, is very important and helps shed the feeling of being alone. However, don't try to force new friends onto your child. Instead, do it naturally by getting together with your divorced friends and their children, or doing something similar to that.

Talk to Their Teachers

A teacher can be of great help, because her or she is a trustworthy adult, outside of the family. Don't feel betrayed as a parent, if your child wishes to talk to someone else other than you. It is only natural for a child to experience feelings they don't want to share with you, in order not to hurt you.

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