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Family Support Agency

How children react to separation or divorce

Family Mediation Service

Separation and divorce are traumatic events which seem to be adult problems but also have a profound impact on the children in the family. Children grieve during these times just as their parents do. Grief is an expression of love/attachment for someone or something that has changed. For children to survive emotionally from separation and divorce, they need sufficient time to mourn their loss. Children and adolescents need caring adults to listen and support them while they express their feelings and begin the healing process towards acceptance.

Parents who manage their conflict and their separation well, and who don't involve their children in the conflict, offer their children a safe passage through this time of change. Recent research has confirmed that children caught in high-conflict environments seldom thrive.

Children have different needs and reactions to separation depending on their age.

Listed below are some of the needs and reactions of children at different age levels and what parents can do to help meet those needs.

Birth to 18 months

Needs

- nurturing care and protection
- closeness to primary carers
- consistency in environment and routines

Possible reactions

- disturbed sleeping patterns
- eating habits change
- clinging to carer

What can parents do?

- maintain consistency in environment and caring
- keep the atmosphere calming (no arguing)
- gradually make changes in lifestyle
- minimal separation from primary carer

Toddler (18 months – 2 years)

Needs

- fears losing primary carer's love
- doesn't cope well with multiple changes
- keenly aware of non-verbal expressions
- home and family are important and begin to realise they are missing someone
- unable to verbalise feelings, may act them out
- bewilderment

Possible reactions

- irritability – anxiety
- clingy, demands for affection and approval
- daily asking for parent that is not present
- physical aggression; hitting, biting, bullying

What can parents do?

- give lots of attention; holding, cuddling
- limit separation from primary carer
- consistency in routines
- simple explanations of separation enforcing it is not their fault
- spend meaningful time with each parent

3 – 6 years

Needs

- realise that they are different from others
- self-centred
- realise someone is missing in the family unit
- believe their actions control others' behaviour
- identify with opposite sex parent
- fears abandonment
- yearning for absent parent

Possible reactions

- maintains fantasies of non-custodial parent's return
- regression in behaviour: bed wetting, thumbsucking
- irritable
- aggression and hostility
- crying

What can parents do?

- attention – time together and cuddling
- explain changes that are occurring
- teach appropriate ways to release hostility, aggression
- reassure parents' love

7 – 10 years

Needs

- fear of the future; concerns about money, food, shelter
- self-conscious about family being different
- loyalty conflicts

Possible reactions

- prevailing sadness, increased crying or withdrawal
- reconciliation fantasies
- diminished school work
- conflicts with friends
- angry and blame parent they are living with or visiting
- problem with self identity

What can parents do?

- constant reassurance both physically and verbally
- maintain consistent routine
- discuss with teachers
- ask family and/or friends to give additional support
- teach appropriate ways of acting out aggression

11 – 13 years

Needs

- self-conscious of their family being different
- loyalty conflicts
- suffering a loss of identity; low self-esteem
- insecure; vulnerable
- depression
- empathetic to one parent
- loneliness
- busy themselves with activities and friends; seeking approval
- feel powerless over their life

Possible reactions

- worry about custody arrangements
- headaches, stomach aches
- withdrawn from friends and activities
- academic decline/indifference
- preoccupied with perfection
- lying
- hostility toward one parent
- demanding adult explanations
- stealing/shoplifting
- cheating
- drug/alcohol abuse
- extreme anger often covering intense emotional pain

What can parents do?

- create times for communication
- honestly answer their questions
- affirm their feelings and teach better coping methods
- seek help from counsellors /therapists
- allow some freedom and choice making
- make home a comfortable place to be

14 – 20 years

Needs

- feel caught in the middle
- express much negativity
- frequent mood swings
- overwhelmed with additional responsibility
- outward denial of inner turmoil
- loyalty conflicts
- embarrassment of parents' sexuality
- dependent/independent conflicts
- need peer approval; prefer friends
- sensitive to family tensions/visitation
- fear parental illness

Possible reactions

- drug/alcohol abuse
- gang involvement
- sexual activity
- decline in academic performance
- severe depression/isolation
- violence, aggression to self or others

What can parents do?

- seek out counselling/therapy
- reassurance of love and concern
- set clear fair limits and expectations
- create time for communication and attention
- ask family/friends to add support to adolescent

The reactions listed below are normal. If they become long lasting or intense, it is best to seek the advice of a counsellor or therapist:

Normal

- Dullness of senses
- Loss of appetite
- Restless sleep
- Quiet; into self
- Irritable, crabby
- Upset stomach, headaches
- Shock
- Decline in grades
- Discipline problems

Troubled

- Decrease in functioning ability
- Major change in eating habits
- Won't sleep alone; nightmares
- Isolation; total withdrawal
- Physical aggression; violence
- Psychosomatic illnesses
- Total denial of event
- Drop out; expulsion from school
- Trouble with law; gang activity
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Sexual activity

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How children react to separation or divorce

How your children cope with your separation depends on various factors – sex, age, personality, support structures – but primarily, how you, their parents, are coping. How you handle conflict, and how available you are to support your children through their pain will determine their adjustment.

It is inevitable and necessary that children grieve. It's a normal reaction to loss, and children have lost their family structure as they knew it. They now have to adjust to a new family structure.

The Family Mediation Service is a state run service staffed by professionally trained and accredited mediators. It was set up in 1986 and now operates under the auspices of the statutory Family Support Agency. There are 16 offices located around the country.

Full-time offices are located in the following cities:

DUBLIN

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Hibernian House, 80A South Mall, Cork.

Telephone: (021) 4252200 Fax: (021) 4251331

GALWAY

Ross House, Merchant's Road, Galway.

Telephone: (091) 509730 Fax: (091) 567623

For information on the location of other offices, please contact one of the above numbers or visit www.fsa.ie/familymediation