Children of Divorce: Easing Their Pain

by Elissa Sonnenberg, MSEd

En Español (Spanish Version)

Andrea B. was four years old when her parents divorced.

"I remember feeling scared and uncertain and helpless, like my world was falling apart," she says. Neither of her parents explained the break-up to Andrea, who was first plagued by nightmares, then by guilt. "As much as my head might tell me my parents' divorce wasn't my fault, deep-down, I felt like it was," she says.

Andrea kept in contact with her father but lived with her mother. She initially overcompensated for her loss by becoming a super-responsible perfectionist, 'partially because of an unconscious fear that if I wasn't good enough perhaps my mother would leave me, too," she explains. As Andrea grew older, she overcame most of her fears, yet she still battles shyness and the deeply rooted belief that her father left because something was wrong with her.

Creating a Long-Lasting Impact

Research suggests Andrea's response to her parents' divorce is not uncommon. In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, psychologist Judith Wallerstein and colleagues offer surprising and controversial conclusions that even seemingly well-adjusted children of divorce can suffer from its impact long after childhood.

"Parents need to know what a radical change divorce brings to their kids no matter how carefully they plan," says Julia Lewis, PhD, one of the book's authors. The authors' 25-year study of 93 children concludes that when parents divorce, children are more likely to grow up with continued fears of loss, change, conflict, betrayal, and loneliness. Even those who had no obvious problems with grades, friends, or inappropriate displays of aggression faced emotional after-effects during adulthood, Dr. Lewis says.

Communicating With Your Kids

Experts say that how parents communicate with their children about the divorce and the impending changes in the family can be as challenging as it is essential, and they recommend the following ways of easing the transition:

Tell the Truth

Many parents find it easier to avoid talking about the divorce completely, while others fabricate stories to appease their children for the short-term. But a child's future sense of trust in relationships hangs in the balance. "Rule number one is avoid telling your children something you're going to have to reverse in three months or three years," says Jennifer Lewis, MD, pediatrician and co-author of *Don't Divorce Your Children*. "You don't have to tell your child the whole truth," she adds. "You can add things as your child grows and can understand more.”

Avoid Blanket Reassurances

Parents who try to assure their children with comments like "everything will be fine" or "you'll be able to see Daddy whenever you want" may put their children's sense of trust at risk.
"Parents have to find a way to understand what's being communicated through their child's behavior," says Neil Talkoff, PhD, director of child and family psychology training at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. That means looking carefully for any repeated variations out of their normal range of behavior, but not interpreting every temper tantrum as a sign of emotional scarring from the divorce. Toddlers may regress or become more needy and clingy. School-aged children may get lower grades or act out aggressively in anger. Teens may experiment with drugs, sex, or gangs to feel like they belong. Dr. Talkoff adds that children who show no signs of change should also be carefully observed.

Get Help When Needed

There are many resources available for divorced parents and their children—from classes to support groups to therapists. If parents suspect their children may not be adjusting well to life after divorce, Dr. Talkoff recommends they consider getting professional help, like counseling.

Putting the Children First

If you are getting divorced, it is important to put your children first in the following ways:

- Remain active, involved parents.
- Talk to each other about what you do and do not want for your children before discussing issues with them.
- Create a reasonable, workable schedule for custody or visitation.
- Keep any negative opinions about each other private.
- Allow your children the freedom to love you both.
- Avoid putting unnecessary responsibilities on the children.
- Plan for current and future child-rearing expenses.

In short, Dr. Talkoff says, "Parents still need to be parents, working together."

Parenting After the Divorce

Despite the challenges of successful co-parenting, Dr. Jennifer Lewis sees many divorced parents who she believes handle their parenting roles well. She maintains that strong bonds can grow as long as parents give their children some sense of control over their futures through honest talk and careful listening.

Andrea, now a divorced mom with a two-year-old son of her own, knows that while the effects of her parents’ divorce will always stay with her, so will the resilience that helped her grow beyond its impact. She hopes to pass that strength on to her son and that her own experience will help her meet his needs with openness, honesty, and love.

RESOURCES:

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
http://www.aacap.org/

Kids Health
http://kidshealth.org/

CANADIAN RESOURCES:

Health Canada
http://www hc-sc.gc.ca/index_e.html/

Public Health Agency of Canada
http://www.phac aspc gc.ca/
REFERENCES:


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