

How Parents' Behavior During Divorce Affects Children By Dr. Laura Fadell

It's well known that approximately fifty percent of first marriages end in divorce. Second and third marriages fare far worse at sixty-seven percent and seventy-four percent failure rates respectively, according to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology. Of those first marriages that end in divorce, forty-four percent involve children. The question couples planning on separating and/or divorcing need to ask themselves is not "How will a divorce affect our children?" but rather, "How will *our behavior* before, during, and after the divorce affect our children?"

Research shows that the effects of divorce on children depend on many factors: the age of the child, the child's gender and personality, the support provided by friends and family, their ability to express how they feel, the child's history of stress and coping, and the amount of conflict between the divorcing parents. Years of working with families in conflict have shown me that the relationship between parents during this time of change significantly impacts children and can be the 'make or break' factor that determines how well children adjust. After all, children take their cues from parents – meaning, if parents can demonstrate a healthy response to separation and divorce, so too will their children. How parents manage their emotions is key to their children's emotional survival.

Recent studies have identified grief, denial, depression, sorrow, fear, anger, relief, and acceptance as typical reactions among children involved in divorce. There are several risk factors for maladjustment in children whose parents are contemplating a separation/divorce. Boys are more at risk than girls, primarily because more mothers are awarded primary physical custody than fathers, and the absence of the male role-model makes it more difficult for boys to adjust to divorce. Similarly, younger children are at risk short-term due to confusion surrounding the divorce and the loss of the parent no longer living in the home. This is because younger children are less able to make sense of all the changes that are occurring. However, the preadolescent and adolescent children are more at risk over the long-term because their close alignment with friends at this age represses their feelings and distracts them from their parents' divorce. The degree to which the child is drawn into marital conflict also predicts how well they will adjust. For example, the more a child is part of the parental conflict, the more confusion, frustration, anger, and loyalty conflicts he or she will likely experience. Divorcing parents who cannot peaceably make decisions about their children's welfare and negotiate issues related to the children, put their children at increased risk for problems. Quite simply, the greater the conflict between parents, the greater the risk for children!

Most parents are aware of this last fact, yet many still cannot manage to reel in their own emotions, suspend their desire to hurt the other spouse, and thus drag their children into the middle. Divorcing parents will often say to me "We don't fight in front of the children." Unfortunately, many children will report to me quite the opposite. In addition, parents tend to underestimate their children's powers of perception. Even infants are capable of picking up on changes in tone of voice, body tension/language, facial

expressions, etc. Sometimes it takes an objective, outside observer to help parents see what they are actually doing versus what they think they are doing.

I realize that no parent wants to intentionally put children at risk during a divorce. But divorce is emotional, chaotic, scary, and very unpredictable, all of which put parents at risk as well. If you are a parent considering separation and/or divorce and find the conflict between you and your spouse spilling over into your child's world, you may want to consider seeking out the assistance of a professional to help you navigate these very treacherous waters. The below suggestions may also be helpful:

- Children need predictability. Maintain regular routines and your child will be less likely to be overwhelmed by the changes divorce brings.
- Children need frequent and regular contacts with *both* parents, and continued contact with friends and relatives of both parents.
- Parents should exercise *extreme caution* when introducing new boyfriends or girlfriends to children. Children often feel confused about their sense of loyalty, and parents' causal relationships may contribute to children's sense of insecurity and instability.
- Children need relationships with both parents. A parent needs to stress the good points about the other parent and avoid name-calling, saying bad things, or blaming the other parent for problems. If you don't, I guarantee it will backfire on you.
- Keep family photos available, including photos of the other parent.
- Allow your child to express their love for the other parent and openly talk about their experiences with the other parent.
- If children complain about one parent, the other parent should encourage children to take the complaint to the person responsible rather than agree with the children.
- Encourage the other parent's involvement in the children's school or other activities, provide copies of report cards, and details about doctor appointments freely.
- Parents should talk *directly* to each other about child-related information – do not use your child as a messenger under any circumstances!
- Do not ask children what goes on in the other parent's home – this is a violation of children's trust.
- Tell your children *together* if a separation or divorce is imminent.
- Answer all children's questions honestly but avoid unnecessary details.
- NEVER discuss financial matters with or in the presence of your children.