

# Children's Understanding of Divorce By Age Group

Children's understanding of divorce depends on their age. It is important for parents to know what thoughts and feelings children of different ages may be having so that they can modify their own behaviors to help children adjust to the divorce.

## Infants Understandings

- Infants notice changes in parents' energy level and emotional state.
- Older infants notice when one parent is no longer living in the home.

## Feelings

- More irritability, such as crying and fussing.
- Changes in sleeping, napping, and other daily routines.
- If a new adult moves into the home, older infants may be nervous and fearful.

## What Can Parents Do?

- Keep normal schedules and routines.
- Reassure infants of your continued presence with physical affection and loving words.
- Keep children's favorite toys, blankets, or stuffed animals close at hand.
- Gradually introduce older infants to new adult friends.

## What Can Providers Do?

- Have parents leave favorite toys, blankets or stuffed animals with the child while in your care.
- As much as possible, limit or slowly introduce new staff members to the infant – keeping familiar staff working with the infant as much as possible.
- Keep routines and schedules the same.
- Provide information on the registration sheet regarding marital status or other trauma producing life events. Update often and use this a basis to start a discussion should the information change.

## Toddlers Understandings

- Recognize that one parent no longer lives at home.
- May express empathy toward others, such as a parent who is feeling sad.

## Feelings

- May have difficulty separating from parents.
- May express anger toward parent.
- May lose some of the skills they have developed, like toilet training.
- Toddlers may show some of the behaviors that they "grew out of," such as thumb sucking.
- Sleeping and naptime routines may change.
- Older toddlers may have nightmares.

## What Can Parents Do?

- Spend more time with children when preparing to separate (e.g., arrive 10 – 15 minutes earlier than usual when you take your child to childcare).
- Provide physical and verbal reassurance of love.
- Show understanding of child's distress; recognize that, given time and support, old behaviors (thumb sucking) will disappear and newly developed skills (toilet training) will reappear.
- Talk with other important adults and caregivers about how to support your child during this transition time.
- Make sure that there is a good relationship between you and the family even before stressful life events such as divorce happens, so that parents feel comfortable talking about the changes in the child's life.

## What Can Providers Do?

- Show understanding of child's distress; recognize that, given time and support, old behaviors (wetting pants) will disappear and newly developed behaviors (toilet training) will reappear.
- Set realistic expectations for each child's developmental level.
- Nurture and cherish all of the children in your care. Accept them for who they are.

- Remember the value of laughter.
- Contribute to each child's self-worth positively by providing encouragement.
- Take time to develop mutual respect and trust between you and the children.

### **Preschool & Early Elementary Children Understandings**

- Preschoolers recognize that one parent no longer lives at home.
- Elementary school children begin to understand that divorce means their parents will no longer be married and live together, and that their parents no longer love each other.

### **Feelings**

- Will likely blame themselves for the divorce.
- May worry about the changes in their daily lives.
- Have nightmares.
- May exhibit signs of sadness and grieving because of the absence of one parent.
- Preschoolers may be aggressive and angry toward the parent they "blame".
- Because preschoolers struggle with the difference between fantasy and reality, children may have rich fantasies about parents getting back together.

### **What Can Parents Do?**

- Repeatedly tell children that they are not responsible for the divorce.
- Reassure children of how their needs will be met and of who will take care of them.
- Talk with children about their thoughts and feelings; be sensitive to children's fears.
- Plan a schedule of time for children to spend with their other parent. Be supportive of children's ongoing relationship with the other parent.
- Read books together about children and divorce (see list at end of guide).
- Gently, and matter-of-factly, remind children that the divorce is final and that parents will not get back together again.

### **What Can Providers & Educators Do?**

- Discipline using logical consequences. Guide each child by letting him or her know when behavior is acceptable. Verbally recognize positive behavior.
- Interact with the child. Allow time for children to share their thoughts. Plan time for children to play alone, in small groups, and in large groups.
- Involve children as helpers. Be patient, as it may take longer to complete the task when the child is helping you.
- Provide space for the child's things while they are in your care.
- Watch for post-traumatic play. Children reenact the traumatic events through their play. This is different from regular play because they don't seem to show any pleasure or joy in the play. Instead, they just keep acting out the event over and over.
- Invite both parents to parent teacher conferences, open houses and special events. Keep both parents informed in person, by mail or phone as much as possible.
- Don't assume that a parent will pass on a discussion between you and them to the other parent.

### **Preteens & Adolescents Understandings**

- Understand what divorce means but may have difficulty accepting the reality of the changes it brings to their family.
- Although thinking at a more complex level, still may blame themselves for the divorce.

### **Feelings**

- May feel abandoned by the parent who moves out of the house.
- May withdraw from long-time friends and favorite activities.
- May act out in uncharacteristic ways (start using bad language, become aggressive or rebellious).
- May feel angry and unsure about their own beliefs concerning love, marriage, and family.
- May experience a sense of growing up too soon.
- May start to worry about "adult matters," such as the family's financial security.
- May feel obligated to take on more adult responsibilities in the family.

### What Can Parents Do?

- Maintain open lines of communication with children; reassure children of your love and continued involvement in their lives.
- Whenever possible, both parents need to stay involved in children's lives, know children's progress at school and in other activities.
- Honor family rituals and routines (Sunday dinner, weeknight homework time, grocery shopping together, watch favorite television shows or movies as a family).
- If you need to increase children's household responsibilities, assign chores and tasks that are age-appropriate (help with laundry, housecleaning, yard work, meal preparations); show appreciation for children's contributions.
- Avoid using teenage children as confidants; plan occasions such as sporting events and graduation ceremonies, especially if you plan to take a new romantic partner.

### What Can Providers & Educators Do?

- Model appropriate ways to deal with stress and change.
- Encourage the parents to seek professional help if needed.
- When unacceptable behavior occurs, redirect children by stating their options. Help them find acceptable ways to express negative feelings.
- Involve both parents in decisions regarding academics and behaviors by sending progress reports or behavior reports to both households or inviting both parents to meetings (scheduling two meetings if necessary).

**Note:** *All information given in this developmental breakdown is interchangeable at any age.* What may be appropriate at the toddler stage may also be useful for those assisting an adolescent or a preschooler and what may work for a preteen may also be useful for assisting a school-aged child or a toddler.

### References

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