



How Coping with Divorce is Different for Children with Special Needs

Sandra Dodson Roland, Ph.D., ABPP / 02/11/2019

For the purpose of this article, the term “special needs” includes any mental health or physical diagnosis such as ADHD, anxiety, depression, learning differences, medical needs and developmental delays such as autism or intellectual disabilities. Prevalence rates for autism spectrum disorders were 1 in 59 children in 2014 according to The National Institute of Mental Health’s website. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s website states that ADHD, behavior problems, anxiety and depression are the most common diagnoses in children. In fact, one in five adolescents aged 13-18 have a serious mental illness, such as anxiety or depression. Over six million children aged 2-17 have been diagnosed with ADHD.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health issues or work and financial stressors. In other words, resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulties or set-backs.

Several factors are associated with resiliency, including: having the capacity and confidence to make and carry out plans, having a positive view of self, having skills in communication and empathy, and having skills in problem solving. These factors are not often well-developed in children, and especially in children with special needs. Children with special needs often require increased physical, emotional, and social supports since they are at greater risk of experiencing adverse reactions to the divorce and custody disagreements of their parents.

Divorce can affect children with under-developed resilience in profound ways. Since children with special needs most often also have low resilience, they often exhibit one or more of the following behaviors (*in relation to how the child acted and behaved prior to the divorce*):

- Behavioral regression or temper tantrums lasting longer than should be expected.
- Inability to calm themselves as they had done in the past or in comparison to same-age peers.
- Inability to put words to feelings.
- Drop in focus at school and possibly a decline in grades.
- A tendency to keep to themselves more than normal.

I started studying resilience while I was the Psychology Department Director at a local pediatric hospital. Although my research was not published, I found that children who exhibited healthy resilience fared better when there were complications with their medical treatment. For instance, in children with low resilience, setbacks that occurred with their medical treatment led to a drop in school grades in addition to behavioral difficulties at home. Conversely, children with high resiliency were able to handle medical setbacks without causing functional disruptions at school or home.

Things to keep in mind for children with special needs whose parents are going through a divorce:

- Finding a child custody evaluator with an understanding of a child's special needs is not enough. Look at the evaluator's CV/resume to determine if he/she is Board Certified in Child and Adolescent Psychology. Additionally, make sure he/she is attending conferences on the subject of special needs and that he/she is a member of associations that focus on children's development, both typical and atypical. Examples include:
 - American Psychological Assn. Division 16 – School Psychology
 - American Psychological Assn. Division 33 – Intellectual Disabilities & Autism Spectrum Disorders
 - National Association of School Psychologists
 - Society for the Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics
- The child custody evaluator should understand the gender difference in how parents of children with an autism spectrum disorder cope with stress, as well as how they advocate for their children. Additionally, the evaluator should have an understanding of the parent's awareness for their child's unique needs. These components should be a part of a complete evaluation.
- Find a child custody evaluator who has a thorough understanding of the local school systems in order to recommend what is in the best interests of the special needs child.
- Children with special needs are more likely than other children to have difficulty with change and transitions. Encourage the parents to be consistent with parenting practices and schedules and to warn the child of changes that may be taking place soon. Stress the importance of limiting discord in front of the child.

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