

The Effect of Divorce on Children

It's now known that emotional development in children is directly related to the presence of warm, nurturing, sustained, and continuous interaction with both parents. Anything that interferes with the vital relationship with either mother or father can have lasting consequences for the child.

One landmark study revealed that 90 percent of children from divorced homes suffered from an acute sense of shock when the separation occurred, including profound grieving and irrational fears. Fifty percent reported feeling rejected and abandoned, and indeed, half of the fathers never came to see their children three years after the divorce. One-third of the boys and girls feared abandonment by the remaining parent, and 66 percent experienced yearning for the absent parent with an intensity that researchers described as overwhelming. Most significant, 37 percent of the children were even more unhappy and dissatisfied five years after the divorce than they had been at eighteen months. In other words, time did not heal their wounds.

That's the real meaning of divorce. It is certainly what I think about, with righteous indignation, when I see infidelity and marital deceit portrayed on television as some kind of exciting game for two.

The bottom line is that you are right to consider the welfare of your children in deciding whether or not to seek a divorce. As empty as the marital relationship continues to be for you, it is likely that your kids will fare better if you choose to stick it out.

When It's Damaging for the Children

Research has also shown that truly damaging marriages that experience violence, significant verbal abuse or other behaviors that are significantly destructive can be more detrimental to the welfare of children than a divorce. This is not to say that divorce is a remedy in your situation. It is clear that every effort must be made to establish and maintain a healthy marriage for the sake of the children. While such efforts may demand substantial time, effort and change on the part of the spouses, the health and welfare of the children make such efforts more than worthwhile. Professional help to determine methods to improve the marriage can be vital.

Additionally, children who observe their parents model efforts at reconciliation and restoration are provided an example of how to deal with problems in relationships. This will serve to equip them in dealing with the many personal and professional relationships that they will develop over their own lifetimes. Likewise, watching their own parents model problem-solving and reconciling behaviors will better equip them to problem-solve the relational issues that are certain to arise in their own marriages, enhancing the likelihood of marital success and satisfaction.

We Just Can't Make It Work

If divorce is determined in your situation, consult a professional to guide your children through the transitions that are inevitable. Some suggestions include:

1. Do not talk negatively about the other spouse in front of the children.

2. Let the children know that they are loved by both parents.

3. Constantly reassure the children that they will be taken care of.

4. Allow the children to process feelings and emotions. Realize that children at different ages will process differently.

5. Do not expose children to more information than necessary for them to understand the situation.

6. Keep conflict between the spouses behind closed doors. Do not expose children to any negative, hostile or escalated conversations.

7. Provide the children outside support such as friends, clubs, churches, school or other organizations.

Recommended Reading

Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan B. Kelly, *Surviving the Breakup* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 33.

The Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide by Dr. James Dobson
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

This information is presented for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for informed medical advice or training. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat a mental health problem without consulting a qualified health or mental health care provider.

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HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU WOULD BENEFIT FROM COUNSELING?

These conditions or situations are widely experienced and may indicate the need for professional counseling:

- Depression, discouragement
- Lack of motivation, apathy
- Anger, bitterness, resentment
- General dissatisfaction with life or relationships
- Difficulties in handling life events
- Marriage and family conflicts
- Sexual dysfunction
- Difficulties in decision making
- Physical ailments for which no medical cause can be found, such as headaches and lower back pain. (Medical consultation may be required in conjunction with therapy.)
- Difficulty in building and maintaining satisfying relationships
- Job stress, inability to keep jobs
- Inability to deal with a child's misbehavior or school problems
- Compulsive behaviors (eating disorders, spending, sexual issues)
- Issues related to low self-esteem or lack of self-worth
- Excessive dependence upon the approval or validation of others

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THE EFFECT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN



*Supporting
Children
Through
Divorce*