Divorce, Critical Age, and Characteristic Reactions

Statistics and Facts of Single-Parent Families

1. It is the most prevalent structure in Western culture other than nuclear families and it is anticipated that it will soon over take the conventional nuclear unit.
2. The divorce rate has tripled in the United States since 1960.
3. The anticipated trend is single-parent homes in serial marriages.
4. It is estimated that 1,000,000 children experience a parental divorce each year.

Related Issues

1. Expect normal developmental crises as part of reaction to divorce.
2. Relief reaction is rare; usually only in homes with abuse and/or neglect.
3. The quality of the parent/child relationship is not a key factor (i.e. non-caring fathers may be missed.)
4. The key time frame for adjustment of a child to the parents’ divorce is 18 mos. Premature demands such as those noted below may increase and prolong negative reaction.
5. Children may monitor the parents’ emotional intensity and feel obliged to mimic their reaction to the divorce or to the other parent

Factors Most Effecting a Child’s Reaction to a Divorce

1. The maturity of the child
2. The parents’ reaction to the divorce
3. The parent’s reaction to the other parent
4. The parents putting the child in the middle

Characteristic Reactions to Divorce by Age Groupings

Considerations

1. Not all children will show all the reactions discussed below, but none will show no reactions.
2. The reactions discussed below are typical for non-psychotic/non-traumatized children and adolescents.
3. The reactions listed below are non-cumulative (i.e. if a child is 6 when the parents divorced, he/she will not experience the reactions of the 9-12 yr. old when he/she becomes 9.) and vary greatly in intensity and length.

Age 0 - 3 Years

The nature and age of the children do not allow for interviewing and opinions are only suggested and are based on the findings with ages of children ages 3-5.
**Age 3 - 5 Years**
Fear is the #1 observed emotion. Children may question that all relations will end. There may be regression such as brief blanket holding or brief thumb sucking or bed wetting.

Fantasy explanation regarding the absent parent may take place i.e. “My daddy’s an astronaut and he is on the moon and won’t be back for a long time.”

A child may fear being replaced and that the absent parent will find a new child. There can be bewilderment involving the present and concerning the future.

Denial may be present where the child discounts facts and refutes the situation. At times there can be “Utopian Play” using dolls or stories to imagine the “perfect” family.

Underdeveloped guilt may be experienced with the child thinking, “Me? Was it something I did?”

There can be random thinking (being spacey) to becoming attracted or attached to a babysitter, relative or even a stranger in public.

**Age 6 - 8 Years**

Grief is the #1 observed emotion where there can be pervasive sadness and crying. There can also be feelings of deprivation over food, clothes and toys.

A fear of disorganization and of chaos can be present where there is a fear of being placed out of the home.

There can be a yearning for the absent parent to belief that the absent parent has rejected them.

Many times there can be a heightened anger with the custodial parent and lessened anger with the absent parent where they have been excused.

Some children in this age group display hopes for a fantasy reconciliation and have an unrealistic expectation of re-unification.

There can be developed guilt - “Me! It was something I did!”

During this age, there can be a sense of conflicting loyalties - “Which parent do I chose.”

**Age 9 - 12 Years**

Pervasive anger is the #1 observed emotion where it can be intense and focused. There may be intense attempts at mastery, being successful - at being good or bad. Many children, especially the oldest can put on a facade of strength - “I’m Okay!”

Some children have concerns of identity with, “What will my last name be?” “Will I be adopted?”

Somatic complaints and tension are not uncommon.

During this age, there can be an alignment with one parent - “You are the parent I chose.”

**Age 13 -18 Years**

Embarrassment and shame are the #1 emotions observed.

There can be a withdrawal and isolation from family and peers to just the opposite.

Worry regarding sex, marriage, and future plans are often present.

There can be a more realistic view of money and the development of a hyper-mature and moralistic attitude.
Parents’ Divorcing Script

1. We both love you very much and we will continue to love you.

2. You were conceived with love, which is something that can never change.

3. Our divorce is not your fault, and you did nothing to cause it.

4. We will always help and protect you.

5. We cannot get back together as husband and wife. Do not hope for it.

6. We are divorcing as husband and wife, not as mother and father.

7. We will communicate and work together on matters concerning you.

8. We will not say bad things about each other.

9. You will not have to chose between us.

10. We will support each other's rules.

11. We want you to do well in school and life.

12. There will be changes in all of our lives as a result of the divorce, but we are committed to work together even though we will be a divorced family. We do not expect you to use our divorce as an excuse for problems in your life, but when there are difficulties we want you to know you can talk about them so we can work them out.

13. We do not know all the details about the future, but we will tell you as soon as we know.

14. You will be able to visit all grandparents, aunts and uncles, and they will not say bad things about either of us.

15. You have our permission to mind, respect, and love your other parent, step-parent or the one they are dating.