

## Divorce Through the Eyes of Adolescents

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As if being on the roller coaster of adolescence isn't tough enough, some youth also experience the aftermath of divorce. Parents divorce each other, but children often feel the pain more than parents realize. Children may be resilient with most life events but divorce requires more education and support than many other events.

Children are encouraged from birth to become independent, and few parents think about increased independence as training for surviving a divorce. In many cases, however, divorce requires children, especially adolescents, to assume independence and adult responsibilities. Needless to say, many youth are not ready for such responsibility. Previous rebellious behavior or bad decision-making may lead the adolescent to assume guilt for the divorce. Parents are responsible for the divorce **and** for providing age appropriate information to help the adolescent cope and grow through the divorce.

Generally, research indicates that it takes children, including adult children, five to 15 years to reconcile emotionally with the divorce.

### Indicators of Behavior Change

Indicators of adolescent behavior change due to the conflict within the family may include:

- Change in academic performance.
- Loss of enthusiasm for group activities.
- Loss of enthusiasm for hobbies.
- Aggressive reactions to situations.
- Increased illness.
- Change in friends.
- Prolonged isolation.

Talking to a counselor or attending a support group for children of divorce may ease the tension and fears. Support groups allow the adolescent to see that others experience similar feelings. Research shows that the adolescent of divorce is at greater risk for increased use of alcohol and drugs, teen pregnancies, running away, gang involvement, and aggressive behaviors.

### Gender Response to Divorce

Do girls or boys adjust better to divorce? "Over time all children showed improved adjustment," said Anne Copeland who researched adjustment to divorce in 160 families in the Boston area. A difference in how aggression is expressed was found to be significant. Boys generally display overt physical aggression. They are identified as bullies or problems in the classroom. Unchecked male aggression provides an early introduction to the juvenile justice system. Girls tend to internalize their aggression by crying, pouting, and manipulating situations. They also experience more headaches and stomachaches. Girls are more likely than boys to turn to someone of the opposite sex to find comfort and a renewed sense of importance which may lead to teen pregnancy.

### Messages from Adolescents

*"At first I felt sorry for myself, doing more chores at home, plus holding down a full-time job. Then I realized I was handling everything and I felt great."* (Gaby, 17)

*"Divorce sucks! I can't believe my parents tell me to act my age when they certainly don't!"* (Angie, 15)

*"Parents are always worried about what others think. Why don't they want to know what I think?"* (Hastings, 13)

### Communicating Feelings

The adolescent often grieves for the loss of family memories more than younger kids. Often past events take on a rosier glow in memory than when they actually occurred. Shock **and** denial, anger, depression **and** detachment, bargaining, dialogue, **and** acceptance are the stages of the grief cycle experienced by adolescents during the transition divorce.

Parents can help adolescents transition through the grief cycle by:

- listening;
- helping the teen to identify feelings;
- communicating using “I” messages;
- remaining calm, and
- assuring the teen of your love.

A simple way to remember “I” messages is to think **FBI — Feelings, Behavior, and Impact**. “I — *Feel* {mad}, *Behavior* — {when you call Dad/Mom names}, *Impact* — {You call me names. I think you hate me, too!}”

### Whose Conflict is it Anyway?

Conflict between parents is very hard for teenagers to deal with. It is the most upsetting part of life before, after, and during a divorce or separation.

Unresolved anger between parents may spill over on the adolescent. Parents who are stressed with unresolved anger, daily survival, and restructuring a new life may over-react to normal adolescent behavior. In this instance, the youth could say, “Gee, Mom/Dad, I know I messed up and that you’re stressed, but it wasn’t that bad! Are you really mad at *me*?”

This will often serve as a key for the parent to check personal feelings, remove past memories of the other parent, and focus on the issue of discipline with the adolescent clearly in focus.

What can an adolescent do?

- Communicate with both parents.
- Let parents manage their conflict.
- Stay out of the middle of discussions.
- Don’t manipulate situations.
- Don’t take sides or spy.
- Don’t carry stories.
- Accept each parent for who they are.

### My Parents Are Dating!

Adolescents may understand what their parents are going through with divorce because they have probably split up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. But the thought of parents dating is not appealing! Adolescents find it difficult to recognize their parents as sexual beings. Dating takes careful timing and communication for adolescent acceptance.

Share information on an “as needed” basis explaining that parents also need to have adult friends and privacy. Keep kids informed of who you are dating. Keep the interactions short, if at all, until the person becomes a significant part of your life. Slowly introduce the significant other when the couple relationship is stable and ready to deal *together* with the feedback from adolescents. The significant other should not try to assume a parental role but should develop a sincere friendship with the adolescent.

### Will They Survive?

E. Mavis Heatherington states in her comprehensive study of divorce in America: “Although they looked back on their parents’ breakup as a painful experience, most were successfully going about the chief tasks of young adulthood: establishing careers, creating intimate relationships, and building meaningful lives for themselves. Most unexpectedly — since it has seldom been reported before — a majority of {my} young adults emerged from divorce and postnuclear family life enhanced.”

This positive growth can happen in families where people listen to each other, practice “I” messages, positive anticipation, and parental cooperation. It is possible to survive divorce!

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