



HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO DIVORCE

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Introduction and Overview

Transitions such as divorce in a family can be stressful for all family members. While divorce can be a major life change that creates unique challenges for families, especially for children, such events are not uncommon. Washington State’s divorce rate is slightly higher than the national rate: 3.9 per 1,000 population in 2012 compared to 3.6 per 1,000 nationally (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/HCHS). In 2013, 25,395 divorces in Washington state impacted both parents and more than 23,970 children (Washington State Department of Health).

In order to help children effectively manage changes that can happen before, during, or after a divorce, it is essential for parents, caregivers, and other safe, involved adults to both understand children’s development and their potential responses to divorce. Environments in which parents and competent caregivers provide and reinforce structure with nurturance and involvement or warmth—also called authoritative parenting—increases the likelihood for each family member to be well-adjusted.

Events that may coincide with divorce can include one parent moving out of the home, new relationships with family members, and, in some cases, episodes of unmanaged conflict (Amato 2007; Kelly and Emory 2003). Although children and adults are generally resilient (Masten 2014), each experience of change can interfere with children’s coping abilities. Stressful situations can affect a person’s thinking and actions. Too much stress, change, or unpredictability can impact children *emotionally* (how a child feels internally) and *behaviorally* (how a child acts externally) (Shaw et al. 2003; Shelton and Harold 2007, 2008). Both how adults manage their own stress and how adults respond to children’s behavior can favorably or unfavorably influence a child’s basic need and ability to develop to his or her fullest potential (Kelly and Emery 2003; Emory 2004). A parent faced with immediate or chronic stress can temporarily lapse in his or her ability to tune into, and supportively respond to, unique challenges each child may be facing (Shelton and Harold 2008).

Using The Child Developmental Stages and Appropriate Parental Responses Table

Table 1, “Child Developmental Stages and Appropriate Parental Responses,” is a modified and condensed summary of developmental information and parenting strategies drawn from three divorce education program sources: Bates et.al. 2014; Families First 2008; and West Virginia University Extension 2012. This table provides an overview of considerations to help parents and caregivers understand and support children’s general development and potential responses and needs. The table is intended to serve as an accessible resource and reminder for adults and parents who aim to support children. For additional parenting tools and resources, parents can seek and access a divorce education course, search Extension materials

online (extension.org), and/or consult with a trusted doctor, friends, counselor, support group, and/or other resources listed below.

The left-hand column, **The Developmental Stage**, lists common developmental expectations of children in each identified age range, based on years of developmental research. Additional information on developmental stages can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/facts.html> (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

The middle column, **Child’s Behavior**, outlines key **Characteristics** or components of what children experience at this developmental stage in general, including a special emphasis on areas where a child or youth may show vulnerability. This section also lists the **Needs** that the child or youth in each age group tend to require from parents and other safe, competent, caring, involved caregivers and adults. The **Potential response to divorce** gives primarily emotional (internal) and behavioral (external) responses or areas of vulnerability that *may* show up in a child during this developmental stage.

This section gives particular attention to potentially vulnerable emotional areas caused by divorce or other disruptions in family living that can co-occur with divorce. These guidelines *may* apply to *most* individuals in the given age range who may experience high levels of change and/or stress related to changes in family dynamics that can become dominant in a divorce situation . Keep in mind that *each individual child (and adult) is unique, with his/her own temperament* and people vary in how they perceive and respond to stress.

The right-hand column, **Parent/Caregiver/Adult’s Response**, suggests ways that parents and appropriate caregivers and other adults can support the developmental needs of children within each particular stage and in potentially vulnerable areas. Additionally, being present and available to one’s own personal needs (taking care of one’s own self first), can help a parent and adult cultivate the best responses and build positive relationships with each child.


Summary

Divorce and changes associated with divorce can vary in the impacts that they have on family members. These changes may occur during the actual time of the event, or before or after the actual event. Regardless, at every age and developmental stage, children look to and need caring, consistent relationships from parents and other adults. Across all developmental stages, children need responsive adults to support them in their unique development journey through life. The suggestions in Table 1 offer appropriate, research-based responses for ways parents and other adults, in addition to modelling respect and healthy coping strategies, can best support them.

Table 1. Child Developmental Stages and Appropriate Parental Responses

| Developmental Stage | Child's Behavior | Helpful Parent/Caregiver Responses |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Infant: 0–18 months</p>  <p>Develop trust</p> | <p>Characteristics: Rapid growth. Establishes relationships with outside world. Vulnerable to sudden changes in environment. Develops healthy attachments.</p> <p>Needs: Reliability and appropriate responses.</p> <p>Potential responses to divorce: Regression, difficulty with separation, hard to console.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep routines the same. • Hold and calm baby (provide physical/emotional reassurance). • Return to familiar caregiver environment. • Allow regular contact with safe, competent parent/caregivers. |
| <p>Toddler: 19 months–2 years</p>  <p>Develop sense of self</p> | <p>Characteristics: Rapid growth. Self-centered. Vulnerable to how other adults treat them.</p> <p>Needs: Consistency, routines, nurturing and warmth (positive messages).</p> <p>Potential responses to divorce: Fear of abandonment, anger, fear, or withdrawal.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep routines the same in each household. • Plan for extra time for activities/transitions. • Praise their appropriate behavior. • Set and maintain clear, consistent limits. |
| <p>Preschool: 3–5 years</p>  <p>Define self and role in family</p> | <p>Characteristics: Rapid growth. Imaginative thinking and fantasy play. Self-centered. Learns social roles from parents and others.</p> <p>Needs: Consistency, routines, acceptance of all emotions, modeled appropriate behavior.</p> <p>Potential responses to divorce: Feelings of loss or sorrow, anxiety.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep routines consistent. • Teach ways to express feelings (through talk, art, or other activities). • Allow ample time with both parents, when it is safe. |
| <p>Elementary: 6–9 years</p>  <p>Gain skills and self-worth</p> | <p>Characteristics: Expands skills and peer relationships. Develops empathy.</p> <p>Needs: Reassurance, sharing of appropriate information.</p> <p>Potential responses to divorce: Fantasies of reuniting; sadness, guilt when visiting co-parent.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assure you will take care of them. • Give permission to feel emotions. • Inform child what is happening. • Reassure child is not the cause of (is not responsible for) changing relationship between parents. • Inform teachers. • Encourage child in activities. |
| <p>Middle school: 10–12 years</p>  <p>Develop identity, awareness of self and skill area</p> | <p>Characteristics: Concrete thinking. Seeks peer approval. Evaluates strengths and weaknesses of self.</p> <p>Needs: Positive parental support. Some flexibility from parent to support youth's social needs.</p> <p>Potential responses to divorce: Anger & blaming, risky behavior, detachment.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give permission to love both parents. • Acknowledge feelings. • Teach and model how to handle anger. • Allow for/provide one-on-one contact with parent. • Encourage involvement in peer support groups. • Maintain good boundaries, firm rules, and consistent parenting expectations between homes. |

Table 1. Child Developmental Stages and Appropriate Parental Responses (continued)

| Developmental Stage | Child's Behavior | Helpful Parent/Caregiver Responses |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Teen: 13–18 years</p>  <p>Develop independence</p> | <p>Characteristics: Rapid changes. Shaping identity and life skills. Seeks peer approval. Seeks intimacy. Expresses individuality.</p> <p>Needs: Both parental and self- acceptance of emotions and self-expression.</p> <p>Potential responses to divorce: Anxiety, cynicism, manipulative behavior.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge feelings. Teach/model how to handle anger. Encourage/allow for/ provide one-on-one contact with parent. • Encourage involvement in peer support groups. • Maintain good boundaries, firm rules, and consistent parenting expectations between homes. |

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