

HOW KIDS OF DIVORCE RESPOND TO DIVORCE

All the items in the categories below are generalizations. No two children go through the experience of divorce in the same manner. All of the symptoms listed may be present in one child, and few or none in another. But these characteristics are common among children in each age grouping.

Ages Birth to Two Years

1. Have no conscious memory. Not having use of language, infants don't consciously remember events.
2. Have "feelings" memory. They carry memories within the unconscious.
3. Sense confusion. With Mother and Father seen as "one functional unit" when one suddenly disappears the infant is confused.
4. Sense attachment anxiety. Infants need constant affirmation, touching, nurturing. A "disappeared" significant person creates a vacuum.
5. Fear abandonment. Very little research has been done in this area (infants and divorce), but many strongly suspect that this fear is present and powerful.
6. Delay processing. Many of the issues of divorce as experienced by infants will not be addressed until many years later, perhaps even as late as middle adulthood.

Ages Three to Five Years

1. Experience shock. "How could this happen? Where did Mommy/Daddy go? Why?"
2. Fear abandonment. Terror that Mommy will leave just as Daddy/Mommy did and the child will be alone and helpless. Fear of rejection.
3. Experience attachment anxiety. "I miss Mommy/Daddy so much. I want to cry all the time."
4. Begin to assume personal responsibility – the feeling that somehow, for some unknown reason, they were responsible for the divorce.
5. Can tie memory to words. "I remember the day Mommy/Daddy left."
6. Feel guilt as predominant emotion.
7. Exhibit symptoms of clinical depression, including inability to sleep, disorganized behavior, hyperactivity.
8. Have nightmares.
9. Regress in behavior – bed wetting, thumb sucking, "baby talk".
10. Exhibit psychosomatic symptoms – tummy aches, head aches, throwing up, lower tolerance to colds, flu, etc.
11. Fantasize that parents will remarry; symptom of child's denial of reality of divorce.
12. Are jealous of parents' dating partners.

Ages Six to Eight Years

1. Feel shock. "I can't believe this is happening!"
2. Feel sadness as predominant emotion.
3. Feel overall sense of alarm. Fear of starvation since the breadwinner (in most cases) is gone.

12. Feel “trapped” in the middle between parents.
13. If young teens do open up to you, don’t be shocked at what they say.

Ages Seventeen and Above

1. Sense bereavement profoundly.
2. Verbalize anger and blame against parents. “You are so irresponsible, hypocritical, and self-indulgent!”
3. Are angry with destruction of home they assumed would be there for them.
4. Withdraw from, or wildly abandon themselves to, romantic/sexual relationships.
5. Accept no responsibility for their parents’ divorce.
6. Seek neutrality. Want to be on neither parent’s side.
7. Play multiple roles. In one day a student, Dad’s therapist, Mom’s escort, and little sister’s “father.”
8. Radically alter attitudes toward marriage – for good or for bad. May plunge suddenly into romantic relationships or suddenly break long-standing engagements. Profound fear of marriage.
9. Fear being destined to repeat parents’ mistakes.
10. Turn to siblings more than to peers.
11. Exhibit symptoms of clinical depression, including escape into drugs, romantic relationships, food, sleep, work, or any other available source of respite.