



When Parents Divorce

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All children, no matter how young or old, are affected when their parents divorce. The following is a list of important things to consider when working with a grieving child whose parents have or are divorcing.

- Divorce threatens a child's sense of security. The child may feel abandoned by the parent who has moved out. Often the next overwhelming thought is "Is my *other* parent going to leave me, too? If so, who will take care of *me*?" Separation anxiety and regressive behavior are normal grief reactions.
- It is very important to attempt to maintain the child's daily routine if all possible. This continuity helps provide the child with some sense of security and stability during a time full of uncertainty.
- Young children often exhibit "magical thinking" in which they believe the things they say or do can affect their world. Furthermore, children often feel they are to blame for the divorce. The result: a child might believe that if he or she is very, very good, mommy and daddy will get back together again.
- Children who have experienced the divorce of their parents often feel very different from their peers – that somehow they even *look* different to others now. (Perhaps they look like they feel: broken.)
- We must choose our words carefully so as not to place unfair burdens upon a child: "*You are the man of the house now*" or "*You need to be strong for/take care of your mommy now.*" Children take these statements literally, and in trying to help, we may instead stifle a child's grief.
- Grieving children are very sensitive and perceptive as well as protective of those around them. They may decide not to express their grief openly because they do not want to risk upsetting mommy or daddy.
- It is very important for children to see the adults around them express grief. This gives the child "permission" to do the same.
- Adult grief expression should **never** include negative talk about the other parent on front of the child. Bad-mouthing the other parent only hurts the child who already feels caught in the middle of a tug-of-war between the two most important people in his or her life...it is a lose-lose situation for that child.
- Children need an outlet for their grief feelings. There are many *appropriate* methods of expression: talking, crying, writing, drawing, sports, punching a pillow, etc. Be certain that the child is still expected to abide by "the rules". If temper tantrums weren't allowed before, they also should not be allowed now.
- Grief causes difficulty in concentration. Children often experience a shortened attention span, and school work is often affected. It is important that the teacher be informed about any loss a child is enduring.