

Joanne Austin
Extension Faculty
WSU Cooperative Extension
360-428-4270

HOW DOES DIVORCE IMPACT CHILDREN

Divorce causes many disruptions within families. Parents frequently ask the following questions.

Does divorce have a negative effect on children?

The effects of divorce on children are very complex and not always entirely negative. The impact of the divorce is dependent on the child's age, sex, the amount of conflict between the parents, the support provided by friends and family, as well as many other factors.

What is the effect of divorce on children at different ages?

Little is known about the effects on children younger than two years of age. Very young children do not necessarily suffer just because a divorce has occurred.

Children between two and adolescence appear to be more negatively effected. Preschoolers usually have greater difficulty than older children understanding what is happening and blaming themselves.

Will children ever be “normal” if they have experienced the divorce of their parents?

Studies show that children's behavior may change for the worse within the first several months after the divorce. However, most children make healthy adjustments within two years.

How does the behavior of children change?

Typical behavior changes may be seen. Keep in mind, however, each child is an individual and will react somewhat differently.

Children from three to five years of age tend to be fearful and resort to immature or aggressive behavior. Initially they may fear being alone or abandoned. They might return to a security blanket or old toys. These behaviors rarely last more than a few weeks.

Between six and eight years of age, children have some understanding of what divorce means. They may experience deep grief over the breakup of the family. Some children are fearful and yearn for the absent parent. Many children feel conflicts in loyalty to one parent or the other.

Older children (9-12 years) try to understand the divorce and keep their behavior and emotions under control. These children may actively involve themselves in play and activities to help manage their feelings. They may express anger at one or both parents. Children who are drawn into struggles between the parents tend to have more difficulties.

Adolescents also experience some difficulties adjusting. They may feel a loss of support in handling emerging sexual and aggressive feelings. Sometimes teens have doubts about their own ability to get married or stay married. They may be drawn into the role of taking care of the parent and fail to develop relationships with peers.

Can parents do anything to reduce these negative effects?

Yes. Parents who practice a kind but firm style of discipline foster healthy development of their children. Discipline should provide nurturing and love, yet set firm limits on aggressive and other inappropriate behaviors. Minimizing the conflict between parents is beneficial to the children, as well as agreeing on discipline and child rearing principles. Love and the approval of both parents enhances the children's sense of well-being and self-worth.

It is best to limit the disruptions the children must cope with, such as changes in schools, childcare, and residence. Children seem to adjust best when both parents have regular and frequent contact with the children.