



EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses family breakups and marital breakdowns, as well as the emotional and emotional changes of children in the family and their impact on them.

Splitting up isn't easy. Entire novels and pop songs have been written about it. And when children are involved, divorce can be an especially sensitive situation. You're in the right place. The truth is that divorce does impact kids — sometimes in ways you wouldn't quite expect. But it isn't all doom and gloom. If you're feeling overwhelmed, remind yourself that you're doing what's right for you and your family. Moving forward, try your very best to plan, understand the potential warning signs, and make yourself emotionally available to your child. That all said, let's jump in with some ways your child may express their feelings surrounding separation.

1. They feel angry

Kids may feel angry about divorce. If you think about it, it makes sense. Their whole world is changing — and they don't necessarily have much input.

Anger can strike at any age, but it's particularly present with school-aged kids and teens. These emotions may arise from feelings of abandonment or loss of control. Anger may

even be directed inward, as some children blame themselves for their parents' divorce.

2. They may withdraw socially

You may also notice that your social butterfly child has become quite shy or anxious. They're likely thinking about and feeling a lot right now. They may seem uninterested or even fearful of social situations, like hanging out with friends or attending school events.

Low self-image is associated with both divorce and social withdrawal, so boosting your child's confidence and inner dialogue may help them come out of their shell again.

3. Their grades might suffer

Academically, kids going through divorce may earn lower grades and even face a higher dropout rate compared to their peers. These effects may be seen as early as age 6 but may be more noticeable as kids reach the ages of 13 to 18 years old.

There are several possible reasons for this link, including that children may feel neglected, depressed, or distracted by increased conflict between their parents. With



time, less interest in academics at the high school level may trickle over to less interest with furthering their education overall.

4. They feel separation anxiety

Younger children may show signs of separation anxiety, such as increased crying or clinginess. Of course, this is also a developmental milestone that tends to begin between the ages of 6 to 9 months and resolve by 18 months.

Still, older toddlers and kids may show signs of separation anxiety or may ask for the other parent when they're not around.

Some kids may respond well to a consistent routine as well as visual tools, such as a calendar, with visitations clearly labeled on it.

5. Little ones may regress

Toddlers and preschoolers between the ages of 18 months and 6 years old may revert back to behaviors like clinginess, bedwetting, thumb sucking, and temper tantrums.

If you notice regression, it may be a sign of increased stress on your child or their difficulty with transition. These behaviors can be worrisome — and you may not know where to start with helping your little one. The keys here are continual reassurance and consistency in the environment — actions that make your child feel safe.

6. Their eating and sleeping patterns change

One 2019 study poses the question of whether or not children literally carry the weight of divorce. While body mass index (BMI) in kids doesn't immediately show an impact, the BMI over time may be "significantly" higher than children who haven't gone through divorce. And these effects are particularly noted in kids who experience separation before turning 6 years old.

Children in most age groups also encounter sleep issues, which may contribute to weight gain. This goes back to regression, but also includes things like nightmares or belief in monsters or other fantastical beings that bring about feelings of anxiety around bedtime.

7. They may pick sides

When parents fight, research explains that children go through both cognitive dissonance and loyalty conflict. This is just a fancy way of saying that they feel uncomfortable being stuck in the middle, not knowing if they should side with one parent over another.

This may show up as an intense need for "fairness" even if it's harmful to their own development. Kids may also show their discomfort with increased stomachaches or headaches.

The loyalty conflict may become even more pronounced as children get older, eventually leading to a total break in contact with one parent (though the chosen parent may change with time).

8. They go through depression

While a child may initially feel low or sad about the divorce, studies report that children of divorce are at risk of developing clinical depression. Even more concerning, a few are also at higher risk of suicide threats or attempts.

While these issues can impact kids of any age, they tend to be more prominent with kids ages 11 years and older. And boys may be more at risk of suicidal thoughts than girls, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Enlisting the help of a licensed mental health professional is critically important for this reason.

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9. They engage in risky behaviors

Abuse of alcohol and drugs, aggressive behavior, and early introduction to sexual activity are also possible. For example, [studies](#) show that teen girls tend to have sex at earlier ages when they live in a household where the father isn't present.

Research does not show the same risk for boys. And this early "sexual debut" may be attributed to several factors, including modified beliefs about marriage and thoughts on childbearing.

10. They face their own relationship struggles

Finally, [studies](#) show that when parents divorce, there's a good chance that their kids could wind up in the same position as adults. The idea here is that a split between parents may change a child's attitude toward relationships in general. They may be less enthused to enter long-term, committed relationships.

And living through divorce shows kids that there are many alternatives to family models. The research also suggests that children may choose cohabitation (living together without being married) over marriage. However, it's worth noting that this is fairly normalized in our current culture, regardless of family history.

Telling your kids about the divorce

There's no way around it — talking about the divorce with your kids is tough. And when you're at the point of divorce, you have likely already thought about it and talked about it a million times.

Your children, however, may have absolutely no clue anything has been going on. To them, the idea may be entirely out of left field. An open and honest discussion can help.

Therapist [Lisa Herrick](#), PhD, shares some tips:

- **Bring up the topic a good 2 to 3 weeks before any separation is set to begin.** This gives kids some time to process the situation.
- **Be sure you have a plan in your mind**, even if it's loose. Your child will probably have a lot of questions about logistics (who's moving out, where they're moving, what visitation might look like, etc.), and it's assuring to them if there's some framework in place.
- **Have the talk in a quiet space that's free from distraction.** You may also want to make sure there are no pressing obligations later on in the day. For example, a weekend day may be best.
- **Consider telling your child's teacher a day or so before you tell your child.** This gives the teacher a heads up if your child begins acting out or needs support. Of course, you can also request that the teacher doesn't mention it to your child unless your child mentions it to them.
- **Hone in on certain points**, like how you and your partner didn't come to the decision easily. Instead, you have thought about this for a long while after trying many other ways to make things work better.
- **Assure your child that the split isn't in response to their behavior.** Likewise, explain how your little one is free to love each parent fully and equally. Resist casting any blame, even if it seems impossible given the circumstances.
- **And be sure to give your child room to feel how they need to feel.** You may even want to say something along the lines of, "All feelings are normal feelings. You may feel worried, angry, or even sad, and that's OK. We'll work through these feelings together."



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