

Helping Children Through Divorce

Radha Bhaskaran

Being an effective parent is a demanding task. It requires lots of patience and hard work. When separation and divorce hits a family, parents will have to cope with this traumatic phase of life. Parents must remember that children too suffer during their period of change and uncertainty. The first people children turn to for help and understanding in such a situation are the parents. So, in the midst of their own grief and pain, parents must recognise their children's needs, reassure their feeling and help them better understand and cope with the divorce.

Children like their parents will undergo a whole range of emotions including fear, anger, sadness, abandonment, guilt and humiliation during this period. Some of the reactions while grieving included denial and silence, bodily distress, hostility, confusion and low self-esteem. Research shows that during the divorce period, children try to shut themselves out of the reality of the situation. They may appear unconcerned or indifferent to what is happening. Parents must not misinterpret this as an acceptance of the situation. Children often use such reactions as a means to defend themselves against the loss, by pretending that it is not happening. Children are also likely to often complain of sickness. Many children express anger, which stems out from their frustration. They are also guilt-ridden as many believe that they are responsible for the break-up of their parents in some way. Children may also face panic and confusion if they have to live with each different parent separately as they will have to adapt to different environment.

Here are some things parents can do to help their children better cope with the divorce.

Tell them immediately. Once the decision to divorce has been finalised, let the children know of this decision immediately. It will be best if both parents can make this announcement together, then children will know that despite the fact that their parents may not be living together they will take care of the children's needs together. If the children vary widely in their age, it may be a good idea to speak to each of them separately. The older children may need more information about the divorce than the younger ones.

Do not assume they understand. Tell children clearly what divorce means and how things would change; (the two parents will not live in the same house, children may not be able to see the parent who leaves, as often as before, there may be changes in the home etc.). But what would remain the same is the parents' love and concern for the children. (This information must fit with the reality of the situation).

Reassure them that the divorce is not their fault. Explain and emphasize that they are in no way responsible for the divorce and that they cannot do and are not expected to do anything to "fix" things. Let them know that the divorce is only between parents and that the children are one of the best things that happened as a result of their marriage.

Communicate understanding. Parents should try to understand that this is a very difficult situation for them, and that they may have feelings of sadness, confusion, anger, hurt as a result of this

divorce. Communicate this understanding. Apologise to them that they have to undergo this difficult phase and assure them that with time the situation will become less difficult. Parents should offer their support and their availability to the children whenever their children require them.

Allow children to feel. Let children feel and express their emotions. It will help them in healing from the divorce. Parents should avoid telling children not to be sad, or to be angry or to cry. These are natural expression of the loss and the uncertainty that the children will experience. Tell them it is alright for them to feel as they do and then try to talk to them and help them to come to terms with the change and loss. Listen to their concerns no matter how small they may appear.

Demonstrate love and have fun. Maintain a loving home environment with lots of hugs and pats and find time to do fun things together. Laughter eases tension and helps to ease and heal pains and sadness.

Introduce changes gradually. Sometimes parents may feel that with the divorce, there should be a new beginning and may start changing not only things and practices within the house but also the environment. Remember that children need to be introduced to change slowly and gradually. They need stability and structure in their lives. While they are coping with having one parent at a time, which is big enough change, it will be best not to make further changes immediately. A new neighbourhood could mean having to make new friends and getting use to a new surrounding. This can be very challenging or stressful for the children.

Tell them of future changes in advance. Let them be the first to know of the changes that would be happening in their lives. Where possible, let them have the opportunities to decide on some aspects of the changes and let them feel a part of the new life.

Some of the situations parents must try to avoid are to make empty promises to children, make them tell what the other parent is up to, talk negatively about the other parent. Such actions put children in very difficult positions especially when they are trying to win the love of both parents.

Divorces in most instances violently interrupt the development process of children. While adults going through divorce have some control of the situation, children have none. Children have to adapt to the changing conditions and are likely to be torn between two parents. The good news is children are survivors by nature. Given proper guidance and love, their survival skills can be further improved to better prepare them to cope with divorce and life after that.

Divorce is one of the most painful and emotionally draining experiences that a human being can have. It is a hurt that goes deep and is accompanied by the doubt that it will never heal.

Exclusive Jul-Dec 1998

For more Exclusive Newsletters, please visit
<http://helpfsc.org.sg/exclusivenewsletters>