



## How to Ease the Pain: Divorce and its Impact on Children

September 26, 2011

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*Evansville Courier and Press*

Divorce is a word more and more children are hearing and having to cope with in society today.

Today, one in two marriages ends in divorce, and many of these marriages involve children, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Sometimes children get lost in the shuffle experiencing a great trauma during this difficult transition. They may be scared and confused by the disruption of the security of what they knew as their safe place that was their family. They may also experience pressure to be a "peacemaker" and having to choose between their parents.

This pressure is often too much to bear for a child of any age.

The adults of the relationship are focused more on issues related to finances, housing and dividing of the estate, while children are faced with more of the internal dilemmas of grief, loss of one parent and the idea of what their family used to be, according to Divorce Source, Inc.

Children struggle to find where they belong and need to be reassured that things will be OK.

Divorce or separation may be the best choice for the physical and emotional well-being of all involved. It is important to ensure the children are made aware of what is happening to help ease the uncertainty and confusion.

The following are some ideas of how to talk with the child:

- Be honest. The amount of detail you give should depend on age the child.
- The couple should tell the child together, if at all possible, or agree on what will be said.

- Keep things simple.
- Reiterate that the child is not to blame.
- Discuss that this time of change can be sad and difficult. It is important for the parent to talk with the child about this time of change so it opens a dialogue for the child to feel comfortable to express feelings openly.
- Remind the child that you will always love him or her and will always be their mom or dad.
- Keep negativity about the other parent separate from the child. Children should not feel torn between parents. They should be allowed to express their own feelings, not thoughts put on them by one parent. This can be very difficult as there are many emotions involved in a divorce or separation.
- Help the child to express feelings by listening.

Many times children feel they are to blame for the divorce. This leads to them feeling that it is their job to bring mommy and daddy back together. It is at this time that the children are at a greater risk for physical and mental health issues to arise.

Preschool to young elementary age children may react aggressively and be uncooperative with requests; children in elementary and middle school may experience sadness and loss grieving for the parent that has left or grieving the sense of what their family was; and teenagers may experience difficulties with their sense of self-worth and self-esteem as well as issues in their own relationships. The following may be red flags to indicate that more serious

problems are occurring:

- Trouble sleeping
- Lack of concentration at home and school
- Trouble at school
- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Self-injury, cutting or eating disorders
- Increase in anger or violent outbursts
- Withdrawal from loved ones
- Lack of interest in activities once enjoyed

Working to provide a healthy and stable environment for the children will help them through the difficult time of divorce. Involve children in positive, healthy activities with peers, supportive family members and church members, etc.

Encourage children to:

- Write in a journal
- Practice saying "I am angry or sad because ..."
- Play sports/exercise
- Punch a pillow
- Use relaxation techniques such as creating a happy place while taking deep breaths
- Make a list of questions to ask mom and dad
- Write a letter to mom and dad

There are lots of positive resources for families experiencing divorce. If your child appears to exhibit behaviors that are different and extend for a period of time, seek assistance from a mental health professional.