



A Program of Conley Outreach Community Services
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Community Care Team News

May/June 2004

In This Issue

Nearly 1 in 2 marriages end in divorce. All of us have been affected by the divorce of a family member, friend or neighbor. This issue explores the impact of divorce on children. The information is taken from a 2003 CCT training session by Kelly Strine, M.Ed. LPC of Family Counseling Service in Aurora and provides great insight and suggestions. Please share this information with others in your community.

Children's Reactions to Divorce

How children react to their parents divorce depends on their age and developmental stage.

1. Children Under 5 Years of Age

- Too young to understand parental conflict
- Extremely sensitive to parental tension and angry voices
- Cling to parents for reassurance
- Severe cases: sleep disturbance, nightmares, temper outbursts, confused behavior

2. Children 5-6 Years of Age

- Able to form very simplistic understandings of the content of arguments
- Do not realize they are *not* the cause
- Struggle to make sense of their lives and often tend to blame themselves for their parent's divorce
- Worry about their basic needs being met

- Work to make their parents stop fighting in order to enhance their own feelings of safety and security...if they are unable to resolve disputes, children experience self-doubt and develop distrust of the adult world.

3. Children 7-9 Years of Age

- Involve themselves in the conflict by taking sides or attempting to maintain an alliance with each parent.
- Have strong feelings of sadness, loss, rejection, guilt, anxious behavior, difficulty concentrating, somatic complaints and crankiness.

4. Children 9-12 Years of Age

- Better able to understand the situation
- Inclined to make judgements regarding who is responsible
- Feel alone and frightened
- Apt to feel embarrassed when parent's divorce because it makes them feel different from their peers
- Threatened by the possibility of losing friends and changing schools
- May oppose parental expectations and behave defiantly.

5. Adolescents

- Process of establishing identity is interfered with if child is pulled back into the family to provide support or is abruptly pushed to separate from either parent
- Make strong judgements about parental behaviors

- Display a lack of respect when parent fails to live up to their idealized standards
- Reject guidance, advice and support.

(From: Swerdlow-Freed, I.M. & Swerdlow-Freed, D.H. [1998] Helping children cope with divorce. Michigan Family Law Journal)

Helping Children with Divorce

Divorce is a difficult time for children of any age. But there are some things to reduce the trauma children experience.

1. Tell the Children Together

- Have a plan and be honest with the children
- Keep explanations simple
- Only tell children things that will affect their world
- Avoid placing blame
- Reassure children of your continued love for them, divorce is NOT their fault

2. Listen

- Be available
- Support children's right to have feelings about what is happening in their lives
- Don't judge children or try to talk them out of their feelings
- Stress that this is an adult problem

3. Maintain Routine

- Keep day to day work and home life going (e.g. celebrate special events)
- Keep promises and maintain trust
- Minimize change in children's lives

4. Maintain Good Parenting

- Be consistent, provide positive discipline
- Role model appropriate ways to deal with feelings
- Remember children need your love and nurturing

5. Allow Children To Stay Children

- Do not use children as a source of emotional support or make them your confidant
- Do not expose children to unnecessary information (e.g. court matters)

6. Maintain a Good Working Relationship with the Other Parent

- Be respectful
- Focus on the best interests of the children
- Keep the other parent advised on all important matters
- Avoid criticizing or saying anything negative about the other person, remain neutral
- Don't force children to take sides or use them as bargaining tools

7. Develop a Support Network

- Utilize family, friends, church, neighbors and community resources
- Grandparents can play an important role in maintaining a sense of security
- Quality child care centers and schools can provide a structures and predictable environment for children.

Resources

• **Bridges - Divorce Adjustment Workshop for Children**
TriCity Family Services 232-1070

• **Divorce Recovery Group (Adults)**
Family Counseling Services 844-2662

WANTED

Conley Outreach is collecting gently used "Beanie Babies". If you keep falling over your kids' Beanie Babies and would like a tax deductible donation, consider dropping them off at one of the West Towns offices. We raise money at the summer festivals by "selling" them for \$1. All proceeds go to the Good Samaritan fund to help local needy families. Call 365-2880 for more information.