



FAMILY LIFE CENTRE

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WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

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Family and Marriage Society of South Africa

Alexandra	c/o 833-2057
City Centre	833-2057
Coronation/Bosmont/Westbury	477-5531
Diepsloot	c/o 788-4784/5
Lenasia / Ennerdale / Finetown	833-2359
Soweto	986-3290

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

The way in which children interpret and perceive their parents' divorce can have a long-term effect on their own relationships and how they perceive themselves and their world-view.

It is therefore important that children are prepared and the circumstances of the separation/divorce are explained.



The negative effects of divorce on children are lessened if both parents can tell the children what is going to happen in a way that they can understand.

Children need to know what will change for them and what will remain the same, e.g. home, school, friends, grandparents and extended family.

The effect is lessened if they have regular contact with both parents. **It is the child's right to have contact with both parents during and after divorce.** This is reassuring for children and promotes a healthier adjustment to new situations.

Family Life Centre has a parenting plan "**CHILDREN ARE FOR KEEPS**" which assists parents to make joint decisions regarding their parenting and the future care of their children.

POSSIBLE REACTIONS FROM CHILDREN

A time of **fear**:

- they often don't understand their parents' anger, depression, etc.
- they fear both parents will leave them

A time of **guilt**:

- they believe they have caused the divorce
- they think they are being punished for being "bad"

A time of feeling **rejected**:

- by their parents
- by their friends
- by their family members

A time of feeling **split**:

- they feel caught in the middle
- their loyalties are confused.

A time of feeling **lonely**:

- they often feel isolated and unloved

A time of **added responsibility**:

- they feel responsible for their parents' happiness and for siblings

A time of **sadness**:

- they grieve the loss of a parent from the family unit
- they often lose a familiar way of life, home pets, friends, etc.

A time of **shame and embarrassment**:

- at being a product of divorce

- at parents' new attitudes and behaviours

A time of **confusion**:

- their stable world becomes unpredictable
- they perceive adults as unreliable
- they perceive family life as unimportant

A time of feeling **deprived**:

- they feel uncared for.

A time of **anger**:

- they feel angry at parents, siblings and the world.

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

PRE-SCHOOL (0 - 2½ YEARS)

- | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| ▪ mistrust | ▪ clinging |
| ▪ insecurity | ▪ depressive anxiety |
| ▪ aggression | ▪ separation anxiety |
| ▪ hyperactivity | ▪ physical illness |
| ▪ withdrawal | ▪ crying/winging |
| ▪ disrupted patterns affecting: | ▪ discipline issues |
| ○ sleeping; | |
| ○ eating; | |
| ○ toilet training | |

Suggestions for access:

- *shorter in-between period*
- *more regular visits*
- *consistency in explanations*
- *phone calls, letters, photographs*

2½ - 5 YEARS

- feeling "unattractive"
- fantasies around their own power
- fear of abandonment
- what will happen to me?

Suggestions for parents:

- *provide structure in the child's life*
- *continue everyday tasks*
- *don't give the child too much responsibility*
- *keep the child informed of changes in his/her situation*

SCHOOL-GOING AGE (6 – 12 YEARS)

- fear that the biological parent will be replaced
- fear of all replacements – e.g. dog, child
- identity problems
- divided loyalty
- yearning for "missing/absent" parent
- idolising "absent" parent
- physical symptoms
- truancy
- daydreaming

Suggestions for access:

- *access must include recognition of the importance of peer relationships*

- *importance of the role of grandparents or extended family must be acknowledged*

ADOLESCENCE

- anger / blaming / guilt
- strategic withdrawal / need for privacy
- insecurity over identity
- loyalty conflicts
- insecurity in own heterosexual relationships
- drugs / alcohol
- difficulty with their parents' sexuality
- difficulty seeing parents change
- own expectations of marriage are shaken
- financial concerns
- child expected to be both adult and child
- meeting the needs of the "lonely" parent

Suggestions for parents:

- *Continue parenting vs. being a "friend"*
- *Work out finances with relevant others and not with the child*
- *Open communication between parents*
- *Democratic parenting*
- *See the child's behaviour for what it is*
- *Work out a mutually acceptable way to explain "outside" relationships to the adolescent*

Please access our website on www.familylife.co.za for more information on **Family Life Centre** services and current events.

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