



Helping Children Through Family Separation & Divorce

By Rebecca Jackson

With 1 in 2 marriages in Australia ending in divorce it is critical that as a community we help the children within these families through this extremely difficult transition process.

Separation and divorce is stressful and scary for parents and children! A child's reaction will depend on their age, temperament, development stage and how both parents deal with the situation. Fortunately there are many things that can be done do to help children cope and adjust.

The Effects Of Separation And Divorce On Children At Different Ages

Children's understanding and reaction to their parent's separation and the breakdown of the family unit is influenced by their age, gender and developmental stage. As parents, relatives, teachers and members of the community it's useful to be aware of the individual thoughts and feelings the children may be having so you can help them to adjust and cope.

Infants: Birth to 18 Months

Level of Understanding:

- Infants will notice tension
- Are sensitive to your moods and emotional state
- Will notice when one parent is no longer living in the same house

Possible Reactions:

- Irritable, crying, extra fussy
- Irregular sleeping and eating
- Upset tummy

To Help an Infant:

- Maintain a normal routine
- Give lots of cuddles and one on one time
- Keep their favourite toys, comforters close by

Toddlers: 18 Months to 3 Years

Level of Understanding:

- Toddlers will recognise that one parent no longer lives at home
- May feel like it's their fault
- Will be sensitive to the emotional state of both parents and may express empathy towards either parent

Possible Reactions:

- An increase in crying and moodiness
- More demanding of attention than normal
- Irregular sleeping and eating patterns
- Angry outbursts and confusion afterwards
- Difficulty separating from parents
- Loss of some of the skills they have developed, like toilet training
- Difficulty sleeping on their own
- May show some of the behaviors that they outgrew e.g. thumb sucking

To Help a Toddler:

- Maintain a normal routine
- Give the child extra attention and lots of physical attention like cuddles
- Spend quality time with the child
- Keep regular contact with friends and relatives
- Allocate extra time when preparing to drop the toddler at daycare, the other parents etc
- Be patient and understanding
- Remain calm and try to not get angry at the child for their little mishaps
- Get support

Preschool and early primary school children: 3 to 5 years

Level of Understanding:

- Preschoolers will notice that one parent no longer lives at home
- Will begin to understand what is happening and that their parents no longer love each other or live together

Possible Reactions:

- Will blame themselves for the changes
- May worry about what's happening and feel insecure about the future
- Feel a sense of responsibility to get their parents back together
- May have difficulty sleeping and experience nightmares
- Angry or sad outbursts
- May blame either parent and be very angry towards them

To Help a Preschooler:

- Parents should set-up specific time to have quality one on one time with them every day
- Encourage the child to talk about their feelings
- Encourage regular contact with the parent who they no longer live with
- Reassure the child regularly that they are not responsible for the divorce
- Constantly tell the child you love him or her and are there for them
- Read books together about children and divorce
- Parents should carefully remind them that you will be not be getting back to together with their other parent

Primary School Children: 6 to 11 years

Level of Understanding:

- Understands what divorce is and to some extent the changes that will happen because of it
- May blame themselves

Possible Reactions:

- Feels abandoned and alone
- Worries about the future
- May fantasize that parents will get back together
- Feels rejected by the parent who left the house
- Plays sick to stay home from school
- Tries to reunite parents
- May blame one parent

To Help a Primary School child:

- Keep communication channels open
- Share your emotions and encourage them to do the same
- Spend quality one on one time together
- Encourage regular contact with the parent who they no longer live with
- Maintain normal routines and activities as much as possible
- Encourage outside school activities

Preteens and Teens: 11 - 18 years

Level of Understanding:

- Totally understands what separation and divorce means and the impact it will have on their lives
- Will be aware of any tension or arguing in the family home
- May blame themselves for the divorce
- Will identify with peers who may also have separated or divorced parents

Possible Reactions:

- Anger, hatred and disillusionment
- May be manipulative and try to take advantage of both parents
- Feels alone
- May blame one parent
- May worry about their future security and money
- May feel abandoned by the parent who moves out of the house
- Withdrawal from long-time friends and favourite activities
- May act out in uncharacteristic ways (start using bad language, become aggressive or rebellious)
- Question beliefs around love, life and relationships
- Feeling responsible to take care of things in the family

To Help a Pre Teen and Teenager:

- Maintain open lines of communication with the children
- Encourage them to talk honestly about their feelings and concerns
- Regularly reassure them that both parents love them and will always remain in their life
- If possible, both parents need to stay involved in the children's day to day lives
- Honour or redefine family rituals and routines like movie night or Sunday dinner
- Parents **don't** lean on your child for emotional support
- Stick to household rules and boundaries

Conclusion

The breakdown of the family structure is a distressing time for children. As parents, teachers, relatives, friends and members of the community we can help. By being aware of the basic feelings and reactions that the children may experience we can work together to help minimise the impact on them and make this major change in their lives as easy as possible.

Biography:

Rebecca Jackson is the founder of www.twohomes.com.au, a website created specifically to help, educate and empower separated parents. Rebecca's vision was to create a place for single, separated and step parents to easily access local information, resources and tools about separation, divorce, parenting and moving forward.

"Just getting through the day can be hard enough which is why clarity and focus are so important in the early stages of a separation. I wanted to create a place where parents can come and feel supported and feel like they are not alone. A place where they can take stock of the situation and access information, support services and helpful tips to help ease them through the process," says Rebecca.

Rebecca's goal is to provide information, resources and tools that help create smooth transitions for families who share parenting – but not the same home. So kids can be kids and parents can relax knowing that their children are happy, stable and feel loved.

Rebecca is a single mother of 1, a freelance writer and is the primary content writer for www.twohomes.com.au. She also regularly contributes articles to parenting publications, forums and blogs and has her own blog, Single Mums Rock www.singlemumsrock.com.

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