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Children across different age groups respond differently to the news of their parents getting divorced. A guide to the behavioural issues that may get triggered and how to help

Divorce is not a bad word anymore – at least not in large metros where divorce rates have increased by 50%-60% in the past few years. Given that this rise is a relatively new phenomenon, parents are yet to fully comprehend its impact on children. The loss of a “family” can be emotionally overwhelming for children. However, the consequent impact of a divorce on them is hard to predict. While some bounce back quickly, others may end up with life-long difficulties. Children across age groups respond differently to the news of a divorce, it’s up to the parents to be sensitive and pick up on the signs and take corrective action. Here’s a guide to the behavioural issues that a divorce may trigger in children and ways to help them through it:

Separation Anxiety (Infancy - 6 yrs)

Autonomy is a central developmental goal for children between infancy and the age of six. Autonomy allows children to stay separated from their parents for short periods of time like playing with their friends in a park or going to school. It is normal for children of this age to experience separation anxiety when parents, for instance, go to work. However, consistent and predictable presence of parents allows the child to build autonomy. They learn that ‘When mom or dad goes away, they always come back’ or ‘When I cry someone tends to me’.

At this age, seeing their parents divorce can create significant increase in separation anxiety. The fear of abandonment preoccupies the child. Anxiety becomes overwhelming, resulting in the child refusing to be separated from the parent. This can be debilitating for a child’s development. It can manifest in poor sleep, recurring nightmares, delayed milestones or school refusal.

Treating separation anxiety requires parental counselling and / or play therapy for the child. Having a consistent schedule (meal times, sleep times) and structure greatly helps build predictability. Accommodations at school may also be required to allow the parent to be present on school premises to interact with the child at set times.

Guilt (6 yrs - 12 yrs)

The parent-child relationship model dictates that the parent is the “adult” and that a parent’s needs are always secondary to those of the child. This model allows children between the ages of six to twelve to feel safe and supported as they discover themselves and grow into teenagers. Children at this age idolise their parents. When a divorce takes place, it seems impossible that either parent could be responsible for such a catastrophe. They turn to the

next obvious choice: Themselves. The underlying thought tends to be: *"It must be because of me."*

To compensate for this guilt, children believe they must make amends. The child may start believing that to be loved (and feel safe) they need to take care of the parent – prioritising the needs of a parent over their own. When parents encourage such behaviour by praising how a child is "looking after" them, they are reinforcing this belief – to the detriment of the child. This situation is further complicated by the fact that the child may simultaneously start regressing. A commonly seen example is a child wanting to sleep with a parent after having transitioned to their own room successfully.

Parental relationships form the template of other relationships that a child develops, even into adulthood. When children grow up providing emotional support to a parent, they start believing that to be valued they must put the needs of another above their own. In later years, this becomes the basis of choosing friendships and relationships, unleashing a set of consequences including low self-esteem, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and a preference for abusive partners. These effects can be mitigated.

If a parent (or parents) starts noticing these behaviours, it is important to find ways to restore the parent-child hierarchy. Some immediate changes could include:

- Not discussing details of past conflicts with the child.
- NEVER blaming the child for any part of the outcome of the marriage.
- Taking charge of their responsibilities as a parent.
- Finding a safe space to express and process difficult emotions - not expecting their child to be their confidante.

Detachment (13yrs - 18 yrs)

A family has an identity, personality, and a character. It has a consciousness. For a teenager, a divorce amounts to the 'death' of their family; invoking the same feelings as the untimely passing of a loved one. Parents at this point may be preoccupied with their struggles, leaving a teen to make sense of this new reality on their own. To survive the tsunami of emotions they are experiencing, teenagers may decide to withdraw. They may distance themselves from feelings of anger, grief, fear and uncertainty. They may also begin to detach themselves from parents, friends and family. Detachment becomes a protective mechanism. The underlying thought here is: *"Only I can keep myself safe."*

While detachment may serve its purpose in the short term, in the long term it adversely impacts an adolescent's ability to form relationships or friendships. The added frustration of not being able to accept or understand their own pain becomes overwhelming. To cope with this, teenagers may misdirect their anger on themselves or engage in externalising behaviours which manifest in acts of defiance, self-harm, academic decline or experimenting with substances. To solve this, parents need to do the following.

- Have a joint, transparent dialogue with the child to address the insecurities of the child, without blaming each other. (If parents are emotionally charged a professional can help facilitate this conversation.)

- Explain individually their rationale for separation, reassuring the child that the family is still alive and may now be in a healthier state. It is imperative that this is done without blaming the parent who is not present.
- Reassure the child that they are safe. While access to resources may change, their needs will be met and taken care of.

These can be put in practice even if one parent refuses to participate. Knowledge that the other parent is present and able to address their concerns can go a long way in meeting a teenager's needs.

A reckoner for parents

While a divorce can have adverse impacts on a child, many of these fallouts can be mitigated. Seeking professional help for navigating individual circumstances can be a game changer. Here are some practices that parents can adopt:

- NEVER blame the child for the divorce.
- Do not blame either parent for the outcome. Hold a firm boundary even if your child insists on asking you what the other parent did.
- Lookout for signs of regression in young children and detachment in adolescents.
- Respect the turmoil your child is going through without blaming yourself.
- Spend as much time as possible with your child.
- Be curious about how they are feeling about the divorce. Ask them and encourage them to share their feelings.
- Help them build competence in an area of interest (music, sports, art or academics). This boosts self-esteem and helps them cope with their struggles.

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About STEPS

STEPS Center for Mental Health is a child and adolescent mental health clinic providing psychiatric care and therapy interventions to support children, teenagers and families struggling with a range of concerns including attention difficulties, anxiety, mood concerns, trauma, learning difficulties and dealing with grief and loss.

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