

Digesting Divorce Split can be tough for kids

By Ara Content

Butler Eagle

April 5, 2005

According to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, divorce affects about 1.5 million American children each year.

Most divorcing parents ask themselves some tough questions about what the divorce will do to their children and wonder how the children will make sense of what is happening. How will the children react to both parents as the family changes?

Will they adjust well to a new marriage partner, and perhaps to stepsiblings? Will their grades suffer? Will they withdraw from their friends, and perhaps suffer emotional harm?

“No matter what age a child is, he or she will have more difficulty adjusting to divorce if there is continued conflict between parents,” explains Dr. Deb Huntley, professor of psychology at Argosy University/Twin Cities.

“Other factors that add to this difficulty include: loss of contact with a competent, non-custodial parent; financial stress; a change of address; loss of continuity in school and home routines; and psychological problems in the custodial parent.”

According to Huntley, a survey of literature shows that some studies have found negative effects, other studies have found no effects, and even a few studies show positive effects of divorce on children.

“Research shows that children of divorce are more likely to show more behavioral problems, more psychological symptoms, lower academic achievement, more social difficulties, and poorer self-concepts than children from intact families,” says Huntley.

But many psychologists and family counselors caution that the overlap between children of divorce and children of intact families is great, and children from these two groups look more alike than different.

The better question to ask is “for which child does divorce have a negative impact?”

Huntley cites an overall trend in the research that has been conducted that boys seem to have more difficulty dealing with divorce than girls, and that younger children have more difficulty dealing with the divorce than older children.

Preschool children have a developmental disadvantage in understanding the meaning of divorce and may respond with confusion and anxiety.

“It is not unusual to see regression to earlier stages of behavior, such as thumb-sucking or wetting the bed, in these children. They may foster the belief that if they had only been better behaved, the parent would not have left,” says Huntley.

Children who are in elementary school have a better understanding of the loss and may experience sadness and depression.

“There is a continued fantasy that the parents will get back together. Adolescents may feel anger and blame toward a parent but are also uncertain about their own ability to stay in a relationship,” explains Huntley.

Here are some tips suggested by Huntley for children coping with divorce and new familial situations, regardless of gender or age:

Going Through a Divorce – A Child’s Perspective

Don’t put me in the middle. If you need to talk to each other, please do it yourself.

Don’t make me take sides. You may not have a husband/wife anymore, but I still have a mom/dad. When possible, tell me something positive about my parent.

Unless there is an abusive situation, allow me access to both parents. Take this into account when you are deciding where to live.

The better you get along with each other, the better I will be able to cope with the divorce.

Ask me how I am doing and what I need. Even though you are going through your own loss, I need help talking about what is going on.

Try to keep everything else in my life the same. It is stressful enough to lose a parent to divorce, but even tougher to move to a different school, a new neighborhood, and a new home.

Remember that I am your child. Although you have gone through a divorce, my role is not to replace your spouse or be a friend. Continue to treat me as your child.

If you need to talk to somebody about what you are going through, find a friend or therapist. It is too much for me to carry your burden as well.

No matter what my age is, this is still a loss for me. I may show my grief in different ways, including anger, depression, anxiety, or acting-out behavior. Please get me help if I am having difficulty.

I long for continuity, routine, and tradition. Although our family has changed, keep as many traditions and routines the same as possible.