

DIVORCE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS

For Teachers:

In the classroom, create and maintain an atmosphere of openness and respect for nontraditional families. Provide ample opportunities for students to share feelings without being judged negatively by others.

When the opportunity to discuss the history and present condition of the family presents itself as part of social studies or other disciplines, emphasize that there are many different types of families: some with a few children, some with many children; some with both parents present; some with one parent present; and some with grandparents or aunts and uncles.

Provide reading and research opportunities that enable students to acquire information regarding divorce such as storybooks, novels, and research-based books. Collaborate with the media coordinator to establish a section of the library for materials on divorce and ask your Advisory Committee to correlate these materials with grade level curricula.

Maintain classroom structure and a consistent school routine. Consistency in schedules and discipline provides security for children whose families are going through a divorce.

When a student does share feelings either in private or in the classroom, be accepting and acknowledge whatever the student is feeling. It is not necessary to offer advice or try to find solutions. Often, knowing that he or she has been listened to, especially by a respected adult, is all that the student needs.

If the student appears to be encountering great psychological distress, notify the school psychologist or counselor immediately. If the parents have shown interest and concern, offer to help them seek out the assistance of trained mental health professionals in the school. **Do not assume the responsibility of trying to rescue the child yourself.**

Encourage the student to seek counseling if needed. This can help him/her deal with such issues as unlovability, worthlessness, rejection, anger, conflicting loyalties, loneliness, and sadness.

Set limits to that the student does not slip into manipulative behavior, using the divorce as an excuse for irresponsibility or misbehavior. Be consistent in your approach to the student but also flexible at times when the student clearly feels pressured.

Be alert to behavior changes such as a drop in grades, inattentiveness or excessive daydreaming in class, absenteeism, sadness or anxiousness that may indicate troubles at

home. Notify parents when appropriate and inform them of your observations without being judgmental or attempting to explain them.

It is easy to become overinvolved or identify too closely with the student's feelings, but these occurrences often lead to a loss of objectivity that is detrimental to both you and the youngster. **Try to maintain some distance and avoid becoming overattached to a youth in crisis.** Your job is to offer support in difficult situations, but be prepared to step away when the student no longer needs your assistance.

Once a crisis has passed, continue to check in with the student on a regular basis. This will help to "structure compassion" so that it is ongoing without being obtrusive.

Be aware that divorce is not a single event, but should instead be viewed as a longer process composed of a series of stages. Understand that a student may exhibit emotional difficulties after the initial crisis is over.

If the noncustodial and custodial parents show interest, try to inform both of them of any important events that their child might experience in the classroom. This assists the noncustodial parent in maintaining a supportive link with his/her child.

Review forms and regulations that demonstrate a bias towards intact families. Such policies discriminate and embarrass single parents and children of divorce.

For Parents:

Children need to be informed, hopefully by both parents in a collaborative discussion, about an impending divorce. Pre-divorce preparations are important in that they help to reduce a child's emotional reaction to the upcoming separation or divorce.

It is not necessary for parents to burden their children with unnecessary details, but an honest explanation at the child's level of understanding can facilitate the healing process.

It is important that children are continually reassured that:

- their parents both love them.
- they are not responsible for their parents' break-up.
- everyone will work together to make the situation as painless and comfortable as possible.
- their needs will be taken care of.
- it's normal to feel bad and upset about the situation, but that there are people who will be there to help them through the difficult times.
- their parents will be there to talk and listen to them about concerns and fears.

Minimize change within the child's life. It is helpful for parents to live relatively close together (preferably within the same community), not to change schools, and the custodial parent maximize access that the children have with the other parent.

Keep your commitments and promises. Do not make promises you cannot keep.

Give children appropriate responsibilities and chores to help them feel an essential part of the family. Everyone in the family should have responsibility. Assign chores that are developmentally appropriate and expect children to accept responsibility and follow through.

Talk with your children about their future. Include them in plans for the family.

As much as possible, limit the financial loss to the custodial parent and don't concern the child with financial difficulties.

Take care of your own emotional well-being. Children adjust better to divorce when their parents cope well.

Permit children to remain children and not become miniature adults. Resist the temptation of having them become "the man of the family" or "the big sister" for everyone else.

Parents can arrange post-divorce circumstances in such a way as to greatly enhance children's long-term adjustment by implementing the following:

- maintaining consistency between parents with respect to child-rearing practices.
- frequent and reliable visitation with the non-custodial parent and parent's family.
- an emotional climate that permits child and family discussion of divorce-related issues and concerns.
- avoid comparing households.
- minimum of hostility and conflict between the parents.

Avoid using children as messengers between partners or as "investigators" into the life of the other spouse.

Avoid conflicts and put-downs with your ex-spouse in view of the children.

Below are some suggestions that middle-school students made to their parents about handling divorce:

- Don't have arguments with your ex and then take it out on your kid.
- Do more things with me.
- Spend more time with me.
- When you get remarried, don't forget I'm still here.
- Don't put bad ideas into my head about dad/mom.
- Don't put me in the middle.
- Don't tell me things that you don't want my mom/dad to know.
- Don't leave me alone.
- Don't play favorites.
- Don't influence my decision about who to live with.

-Don't put me on a guilt trip: "If you leave you can't come back!"

Additional Resources:

Ellis, E. (2000). *Divorce wars: interventions with families in conflict*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Jeynes, W. (2002). *Divorce, family structure, and the academic success of children*. New York, NY: Hayworth Press.

Kingsley, J. (2003). *Divorcing children: children's experience of their parents' divorce*. New York, NY.

Knoff, H. & Bishop, M. (1997). Divorce. In G.G. Bear & K.M. Minke, Children's needs II: Development, problems, and alternatives. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

healthyparent.com/Divorce.html: Helping Kids Cope with Parental Conflict, Separation, and Divorce.

www.divorcewizards.com/teachers.html: How Teachers Can Help Children Going Through Divorce.

www.teach-nology.com/teachers/parents/divorce/: Divorce Resources.

Contributors:

Katharine Green

Melody McAllister

Shannon Metcalf