

## EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

From Surviving the Breakup, Judy Wallerstein and Joan Kelly, The Free Press, 1982; Compiled by Susan Webster MA, MSW.

- I     Central themes of the experience for all children:
  - A.     Divorce is frightening. Fear of abandonment is present in all ages. "Who will take care of me?"
  - B.     Divorce is a time of rejection and feeling unloved.
  - C.     Divorce is sadness and yearning – for the intact family, for the absent parent.
  - D.     Divorce is a time of profound loneliness. There may be many daydreams, and little concentration.
  - E.     Divorce is worry-over own vulnerability, and that of both parents.
  - F.     Divorce is a time of conflicted loyalties that are close to unbearable. Custody fights will make things worse.
  - G.     Divorce is anger; a feeling of betrayal. Temper tantrums may come followed by hitting and verbal attacks.
  
- II    Factors correlated with resolution of the divorce crisis and continued normal development:
  - A.     Children have been given appropriate explanations as to parents' decision to divorce.
  - B.     Lifestyle is stable with minimal friction between parents.
  - C.     There is adequate contact with both parents. The child's view of "adequate" is to be considered
  - D.     The love and approval of both parents is presented in the child's life.
  - E.     The importance of a good father-child relationship and its link to high self-esteem and lack of depression, especially in 9 -12 boys, has been acknowledged and acted upon.
  - F.     There is freedom from economic woes.
  - G.     There is a realization that the outcome of the divorce process depends partly on what has been lost, but also upon what has been created, and that the child's need for stability and emotional support is the same as in an intact family.

H. A “new chance” philosophy seems to describe many family attitudes and orientations.

Specific Responses of Children to Divorce to Age Group

<u>Age</u>	<u>Predictable Responses During First Year to 18 Months</u>
3-5	<p>Fear—worries about being abandoned by both parents</p> <p>Behavioral regression</p> <p>Bewilderment</p> <p>Separation troubles during day or bedtime</p> <p>Need reassurance that will be cared for</p> <p>Rise in aggression, irritability, tearfulness and clinging</p> <p>Fantasy, denial</p> <p>Fears more intense but easier to allay</p>
6-8	<p>Insufficient mastery of cause and effect, therefore guilt; responsibility-taking</p> <p>Grief—pervasive sadness, crying, sobbing</p> <p>Fear leading to disorganization, panic</p> <p>Feeling of deprivation, fantasies related to food, asking for toys</p> <p>Reconciliation fantasies</p> <p>Acute yearning for father, inhibition of aggression towards father, anger at mother</p> <p>Conflict in loyalties</p>
9-12	<p>Greater poise, layering of responses</p> <p>Fully conscious, intense anger. Ability to see ahead makes them even more incensed.</p> <p>Shaken sense of identity, offended morality</p> <p>Somatic symptoms</p> <p>Mastery through activity and play</p> <p>Alignment with one parent, clearly taking sides</p>
13-18	<p>Divorce associated with death of family, no more time to grow up</p> <p>Anguish appeals for reconciliation</p> <p>Normal developmental process of separation and individuation may be impeded</p> <p>Parent-child role reversal ensues. Adolescent feels thrown out into the world too soon, as tough the parents have left home rather than the teen</p> <p>Sexual competition with same sexed parent</p> <p>May take responsibility for needy parent</p> <p>Mourning</p> <p>Anger, blaming</p> <p>Loyalty conflicts—despair, depression, guilt</p> <p>Regression or “ultra-sophistication” which is pseudo. No one setting limits</p> <p>Increased participation in family strategic withdrawal—both may work well in helping with adjustment</p> <p>Prolonged trouble likely when one parent leans heavily on adolescent for an extended amount of time</p>