

Helping Children Cope with Separation and Divorce...

Other than the death of a parent, the breakup of a family has the most devastating effect on children. Their lives change permanently as divorce is not a temporary state; it is an on-going process often involving parental conflicts, custody battles, and families fighting. The child witnesses and experiences everything.

Here are some of the issues separation and divorce can bring:

- children see parents as a single entity, so a split is a difficult concept for them
- children worry that their parents won't love them anymore
- children deny that the situation is real
- children feel guilty and blame themselves for the situation
- children sometimes feel that if they are "really, really good", their lives will return to normal
- children feel powerless
- children require extra attention because they feel insecure
- parents are preoccupied and children have less supervision and even less attention
- children suffer abandonment issues, one parent left so the other might leave as well
- children can be anxious and agitated on visitation day, or the day one parent replaces the other for custodial requirements
- children model behavior so episodes of aggression and anger may emerge

Watch for the following warning signs:

- regression
- low self-esteem
- depression
- acting out
- sickness / injury (real or imagined)

How to help the child and family during this time:

- Be sensitive to the situation (refrain from phrases like "broken home")
- Be available both physically and emotionally
- Encourage expression of feelings and emotions in a positive manner
- Assist children in accepting changes
- Discourage guilt
- Stress love and safety
- Talk with children about all the people in their lives that love them
- Provide consistency and predictability
- Display books on the subject
- Keep parents informed
- Support parents, but remain neutral

Tips for parents:

- Encourage children to express their thoughts and feelings.
- Keep the children the focus and not use them as messengers.
- Keep schedules and routines consistent in both homes.

