Children and Divorce

Divorce is painful and stressful for adults and confusing and frightening for children. Children react to parents’ divorce differently at different ages. For instance, infants may lose their appetites, have upset stomachs and be more anxious. Toddlers may cry or cling more, have sleep problems, withdraw or bite or be irritable. Preschoolers may feel responsible or uncertain about the future, become aggressive or have more nightmares. Elementary school children may feel a sense of loss, hope parents will get back together, complain of headaches or stomachaches and worry about the future. Preteens and adolescents may feel angry or abandoned, try to take control of the family or show extreme good or bad behavior.

If parents are going through divorce, they must be sure to be aware of the children’s reactions and feelings. Open, honest, and frequent communication is very important. Get children to talk more by asking specific questions, and then they will start talking and telling you more about their concerns and feelings. Be sure to listen carefully to how they feel and what they mean.

Some children may feel it is their fault. Parents need to tell their children that they love them, and they are not responsible or did not cause the parents’ divorce. Children need to feel support from both parents. Parents can help their children understand that there will be differences, such as a new schedule, new environment and new ways of communication. Parents can help children go through the difficult time by following daily routines, avoiding being in a hurry all the time and putting their children in the middle. They can also use storybooks to help children talk about their feelings or have special time together and avoid involving children in parental struggles.

Do you know what children usually say about their parents’ divorce? They say their parents don’t know how they feel. Children need parents to listen to what they say and feel. What children need from both parents is simple. For instance:

- They need to feel love from both parents
- They need to be free of guilt by being told that their parents’ divorce was not their fault.
- They need to be assured for the future
- They need to be supported emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually
- They need to have hope for the future
- They need to know both parents will remain in their life.

Finally, both parents are responsible for creating their children’s sense of security in their world. All these require love, patience and understanding.

Children’s books on divorce:
- *Why are we getting a divorce?* By Peter Mayle
- *Daddy doesn’t live here anymore.* By R. Turow
- *Months of Sundays.* By R. Blue
- *Free to be... A family.* A book about all kinds of belongings. By Marlo Thomas
- *How it feels when parents divorce.* A dialogue between parent and child. By Early Grollman

References:
- *Focus on Kids.* Videotape, University of Missouri Outreach and Extension

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