

Dr. Pickhardt is the author of Keys To Single Parenting, available from his website at <http://www.carlpickhardt.com/>

COMMON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

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How can parental divorce shape children's lives? Here are four tendencies, NOT CERTAINTIES, to consider. First, divorce can cause insecurity about the permanence of parental love. Second, divorce can emotionally destabilize and intensify a child's growth. Third, divorce can encourage a more determined push toward independence. And fourth, divorce can raise issues about commitment when the child is approaching significant romantic relationships of his or her own.

DIVORCE CAN CAUSE INSECURITY ABOUT THE PERMANENCE OF PARENTAL LOVE.

For THE VERY YOUNG CHILD (up to about age 6), to see love lost between parents can raise a series of scary questions. "If my parents can lose love for each other, can they also lose love for me?" "If one parent has moved out, am I in danger of losing the other?" "Since anger at each other caused the divorce, if I get angry at them (or they get angry at me) will they divorce me?" "If I can't count on their love being forever, then what can I count on?"

No wonder very young children often express more insecurity in the wake of divorce, sometimes seeming to regress, having more difficulty separating from the primary parent, clinging to that parent out of fear of further loss. Often a child will establish security rituals around departure and reunion points with the primary parent to help reduce fears when leaving each other ("Will you return?") and when coming back together ("Are we still all right?"). The parent needs to respect these rituals for what they usually are -- attempts to assert individual control when family change feels chaotic.

Respecting these rituals may mean, for example, reassuring the urgent child precisely four times that he or she will be picked up after school. As adjustment to the new family circumstance takes place, the need for support these transition rituals provide will subside. In the mean time, parents can also strive to make the family schedule as predictable as possible, establishing household and visitation routines on which the child can rely.

DIVORCE CAN DESTABILIZE AND INTENSIFY A CHILD'S GROWTH.

For THE PREADOLESCENT CHILD (around ages 6 to 9) stress from parental divorce can be so overwhelming that less focus and energy is available for meeting the demands of

school. Thus it is not uncommon to see young children during the first year after parental divorce perform less well academically because their emotional energy is diverted into grieving parental and family loss and into worry over what other changes are yet to come. In many elementary schools, counselors conduct support groups for children of divorce to help them work through this painful transition, to give students help in coming to terms of understanding and emotional acceptance of the unwanted family change that has occurred, and to know they are not alone.

The sooner a measure of understanding and acceptance has been gained, the sooner the child able to fully reengage with the instructional demands of school.

For THE EARLY ADOLESCENT (around ages 9 to13), divorce can add additional offense to normal adolescent grievance over lack of personal freedom from having to live on parental terms. Normal grievance complains: "What right do you have to tell me what I can or cannot do. You're not the boss of the world!" Rebellious out of childhood, the early adolescent resents parental authority in a way the old compliant child did not. Coincide divorce with early adolescent growth, and now additional offense is given. Additional grievance complains: "It's not fair, this divorce is all about making you happy and me unhappy!" The frequent outcome is a more resentful, easily angered, more rebellious early adolescent who feels more justified in his or her opposition. "Since you don't care how I feel, I don't care how you feel!"

While needing to patrol how this anger is expressed so that it is kept within respectful and non-abusive limits, divorced parents do need to be willing to listen to the early adolescent's grievances, whether they are directly about the divorce or indirectly about life in general. Better for the early adolescent to talk anger out than act it out in disruptive or destructive ways, at school for example, where educational costs from misbehavior and academic failure can be paid.

DIVORCE CAN ENCOURAGE A MORE DETERMINED PUSH TOWARD INDEPENDENCE.

For THE MID-ADOLESCENT CHILD (around ages 13 to 16), freedom to be out in the world with peers, preoccupation with personal wants, and obtaining immediate gratification are all prime motivations during this very social, very self-centered, and very impatient period of growth. Parental divorce often increases the strength of all these motivations.

Divorce can cause a young person at this age to feel entitled to more independence in consequence of parents separating the marriage for their own individual well-being, and to push for that self-determination earlier and harder than he or she otherwise might. "If they can do what they want in spite of what I want, then I can do what I want in spite of what they want. If they are free to make new lives, then I am too." With family of origin broken apart, family of peers becomes more important than ever as some reliance on parents has been lost. "I count on my friends more than my parents."

Signs of increased self-determination can include less inclination to communicate with the resident parent (for personal privacy), more inclination to spend time with friends (for significant companionship), and increased conflict with the parent (for social freedom.)

Parenting a mid-adolescent through parental divorce can be demanding work. As soon as father and mother can emotionally reconcile their divorce so that they can continue to work together as parents, being available to consult with and support each other, the better for all concerned.

DIVORCE CAN RAISE ISSUES ABOUT COMMITMENT WHEN THE CHILD APPROACHES SIGNIFICANT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF HIS OR HER OWN.

For THE LATE ADOLESCENT (ages 16 to 18) and for a young person in the last stage of adolescence, TRIAL INDEPENDENCE (ages 18 to 23), parental divorce can have significant effect. It can cause distrust of significant romantic relationships, distrust that is commonly expressed in a number of self-defeating ways.

1) The young person may be CAUTIOUS to his or her cost, delaying commitment so long that the prospective partner finally loses patience and pulls away.

2) The young person can be so CONTROLLING, setting strict terms to keep the loved securely attached, that the prospective partner leaves the relationship to escape this captivity.

3) The young person can be so CONFLICTED between the desire for and fear of commitment, that he or she keeps wavering back and forth until the prospective partner wearies of an engagement being "on" then "off," and ends the relationship to end the uncertainty.

4) The young person can be so CASUAL in dating, avoiding commitment to avoid being hurt, that when a relationship starts to get "serious" he or she decides it is time to get out.

In each of these four cases the older child of divorce is wrestling with the same issue: "Should I dare to trust in a commitment I make or the other person makes when I know from painful experience that married love may not last." For many grown children of divorce, commitment not only requires love, it requires courage as well. Commitment-shy, they may often marry later than children growing up in two parent homes.

Finally, like any adversity, parental divorce can bear children certain developmental gifts, three of which are not uncommon to see.

1) There can be an increased dedication to personal welfare and personal goals.

2) There can be an increased capacity for independence and self-reliance.

3) There can be an increased resilience and resourcefulness when adjusting to change.