

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 01

March 2011

Children and Divorce

One out of every two marriages today ends in divorce and many divorcing families include children. Parents who are getting a divorce are frequently worried about the effect the divorce will have on their children. During this difficult period, parents may be preoccupied with their own problems, but continue to be the most important people in their children's lives.

While parents may be devastated or relieved by the divorce, children are invariably frightened and confused by the threat to their security. Some parents feel so hurt or overwhelmed by the divorce that they may turn to the child for comfort or direction. Divorce can be misinterpreted by children unless parents tell them what is happening, how they are involved and not involved, and what will happen to them.

Children often believe they have caused the conflict between their parents. Many children assume the responsibility for bringing their parents back together, sometimes by sacrificing themselves. Vulnerability to both physical and mental illnesses can originate in the traumatic loss of one or both parents through divorce. With care and attention, however, a family's strengths can be mobilized during a divorce, and children can be helped to deal constructively with the resolution of parental conflict.

Talking to children about a divorce is difficult. The following tips can help both the child and parents with the challenge and stress of these conversations:

- Do not keep it a secret or wait until the last minute.
- Tell your child together with your spouse.
- Keep things simple and straight-forward.
- Tell them the divorce is not their fault.
- Admit that this will be sad and upsetting for everyone.
- Reassure your child that you both still love them and will always be their parents.
- Do not discuss each other's faults or problems with the child.

Parents should be alert to signs of distress in their child or children. Young children may react to divorce by becoming more aggressive and uncooperative or by withdrawing. Older children may feel deep sadness and loss. Their schoolwork may suffer and behavior problems are common. As teenagers and adults, children of divorce can have trouble with their own relationships and experience problems with self-esteem.

Children will do best if they know that their mother and father will still be their parents and remain involved with them even though the marriage is ending and the parents won't live together. Long custody disputes or pressure on a child to "choose" sides can be

particularly harmful for the youngster and can add to the damage of the divorce. Research shows that children do best when parents can cooperate on behalf of the child.

Parents' ongoing commitment to the child's well-being is vital. If a child shows signs of distress, the family doctor or pediatrician can refer the parents to a child and adolescent psychiatrist for evaluation and treatment. In addition, the child and adolescent psychiatrist can meet with the parents to help them learn how to make the strain of the divorce easier on the entire family. Psychotherapy for the children of a divorce, and the divorcing parents, can be helpful.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

[#8 Children and Grief](#)

[#34 Children's Sleep Problems](#)

[#4 The Depressed Child](#)

[#27 Stepfamily Problems](#)

[#52 Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluation](#)

[#00 Definition of a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist](#)

###

If you find *Facts for Families*© helpful and would like to make good mental health a reality for all children, please consider donating to the **Campaign for America's Kids**. Your support will help us continue to produce and distribute *Facts for Families*, as well as other vital mental health information, free of charge.

You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to **Campaign for America's Kids**, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 8,500 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Facts for Families© information sheets are developed, owned and distributed by AACAP. Hard copies of **Facts** sheets may be reproduced for personal or educational use without written permission, but cannot be included in material presented for sale or profit. All **Facts** can be viewed and printed from the AACAP website (www.aacap.org). **Facts** sheets may not be reproduced, duplicated or posted on any other website without written consent from AACAP. Organizations are permitted to create links to AACAP's website and specific **Facts** sheets. For all questions please contact the AACAP Communications & Marketing Coordinator, ext. 154.

If you need immediate assistance, please dial 911.

Copyright © 2012 by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.