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Are your kids at risk?

If you believe your children will be unaffected by your divorce, you'll be surprised to learn that all children of divorce suffer emotional injuries. So the question is not whether they'll be hurt, but how badly they'll be hurt. Here's how to minimize the damage.

By Teri Morrison

When Linda and Steve (names have been changed to protect the identities of individuals quoted in this article) decided to divorce, they worried about how their eight-year-old daughter Shannon would react to the news. They quickly and amicably finalized the divorce to avoid dragging Shannon through an emotional battleground. To keep Shannon's life from having too many major upheavals at one time, they decided that she and Linda would remain in the family home while Steve moved to an apartment across town. Steve and Linda hoped that if Shannon's school routine and social connections weren't disrupted, the transition to a new family situation would be easier on her emotionally.

Eight months later, Linda is breathing a sigh of relief. Shannon seems to have adjusted well to the divorce. "Sometimes, I think Shannon is coping with our new living arrangements better than I am," says Linda. "She never causes a problem for either me or her father. In fact, she seems more helpful around the house than before the divorce -- I never have to remind her to clean her room anymore, for example, or that it's her turn with the dishes."

Jennifer wishes she were half as lucky with her eight-year-old son, Sammy. She and her ex-husband's divorce proceedings mirror those of Linda and Steve, yet Sammy's reaction to the divorce is almost the exact opposite of Shannon's. "I can't seem to reach Sammy," says Jennifer. "His grades are slipping in school, he lashes out at both me and his father over the smallest things, and he often refuses to do his chores. The hardest part for me is watching my bright, happy-go-lucky son transform into a moody, angry little boy."

Most people reading this would agree that Sammy -- and probably his parents -- need some counseling to help him adjust to his parents' divorce. Many would also agree that Shannon is every divorcing parent's dream: a child who seems to accept his or her parents' divorce with little or no fuss. However, while Sammy might seem as if he's headed to detention hall for life, Shannon may be the one who's more in need of counselling.

Michael Cochrane, an author and lawyer specializing in family law, sums up the three basic categories children fall into when coping with divorce: "There are two extremes of behavior that divorcing parents often see: the super-good children, who believe that if they're on their best behavior, their parents will patch things up; and the complete opposite, where children use negative behavior to draw attention to themselves. The worse they act, they reason, the more likely their parents will become united in a common cause to handle the problem."

The third category, Cochrane points out, is the one most parents overlook because they want to believe that their kids are coping just fine with the divorce. "Shannon is a good example of the kind of child who doesn't ask a lot of questions, get upset, or act up during and immediately after the divorce," says Cochrane. "However, children like Shannon are probably in shock or denial: they don't know what to say, so they don't say anything. These kids have a longer, slower-burning fuse than kids who act up, and eventually -- whether it's a year or five years -- their fuse will blow."

Warning signs

Okay, so it's obvious that 99.9% of children will somehow be affected by their parents' divorce. Could anyone -- parent or child -- be expected to exhibit "normal" behavior when going through something as traumatic as the breakup of their family?

Today, enough children have gone through their parents' divorce to allow psychiatrists, therapists, family counselors, and other related experts to determine what might be considered "normal" under the circumstances. It should only take about a year for children to come to terms with a divorce, and while they may still have feelings of sadness or anger, they should be coping well with those feelings. Ideally, by the end of the first year after the divorce, your children should have:

- dealt with their feelings of loss due to the divorce
- dealt with any feelings that they were rejected or deserted by one of their parents
- accepted that the family will no longer be living together
- accepted that you will not be reuniting with their other parent
- removed themselves from adult conflicts
- returned to a normal interest in themselves and their activities
- stopped blaming themselves for the divorce. If you moved as a result of the divorce, they should have adjusted to your new home and their new school, and have made some new friends.

When to seek help

One bad grade on a school test doesn't mean you need to make an appointment with a family counselor. Remember that not all of your kid's problems are going to be a result of your divorce: one fight at school, an incident of bedwetting, or one bad school grade isn't necessarily linked directly to the divorce. These kinds of things happen to any child in any family situation. So before you start panicking that your child has become psychologically damaged for life, check your local bookstore or library for books explaining the development of children (See Recommended Reading on page 26 for some good examples). These resources will help you understand the difference between normal and problematic behaviors.

Discipline problems are usually what spur parents to seek professional help for their kids. Discipline problems can stem from your child's inability to sort out his/her feelings or to adjust to the divorce -- or it might just mean that your child is lacking good coping skills. A child's bad behavior can result from fear, hostility, or insecurity, and it's a sign that your child needs more positive attention. Children who don't receive positive parental attention try for any kind of attention, even if it's negative: they would rather misbehave and get yelled at than not get any attention at all.

Some therapists assert that any extreme deviation from a child's normal course of behavior is a sign that he or she has been affected by the divorce. "A parent should look for extremes in any direction: wild behavior in a quiet child, or if a sociable child won't come out of his or her room, for example," says Dr. Robert Galatzer-Levy, a Chicago-based child and adolescent psychiatrist.

"Changes in a child's social behavior are often the best indicators that something is wrong," says Barbara Anderson, a Toronto therapist and mediator. "For instance, you should be concerned if your child is suddenly acting out violently; regressing to an earlier stage such as bedwetting; having problems playing with friends; developing academic problems; or even experiencing physical problems such as developing stomach or head aches, sleep problems, or eating disorders."

While you shouldn't wait forever to seek professional help, you should give your kids six months to a year to get over the divorce -- if their adjustment problems aren't too severe. Consider seeking outside help if your child is:

- doing uncharacteristically badly in school for three or four months, even after you've consulted his or her teachers and/or school counselors
- losing friends because he or she is acting in an unusually aggressive manner
- showing uncharacteristic, intense anger towards others; this could be anything from temper tantrums to overreacting in minor situations
- developing prolonged mood swings that range from extreme hostility to extreme affection
- showing unrestrained grieving for his or her absent parent and/or for your former family life
- showing other radical changes in behavior, such as continuous problems in school (truancy or fighting, for example), cheating, lying, stealing, eating disorders, or alcohol or drug abuse.

If a child internalizes his or her feelings about the divorce, then it's much more difficult to know if he or she is having problems coping. In fact, a child in this situation may not show any outward signs of trouble until years later. This is more often the case for girls than boys, as Cochrane points out. "A seven-year-old boy is more likely to act up and give his parents a hard time than a seven-year-old girl," he says. "Boys tend to act up while the divorce is under way. Girls tends to be 'peacemakers,' and don't cause a problem until early adolescence."

"Parents want to believe that their kid is okay, but they don't realize that their child has learned to cope in an harmful way," says Jayne A. Major of the Parent Connection in Los Angeles. "But if a child is 'fine' with the divorce he or she is probably disguising feelings of despair, pain, and fear, which can be very hurtful to his/her psychological development."

In cases like this, a school teacher, guidance counselor, family doctor -- someone your child likes and trusts -- may have more luck than you in trying to discern what's really going on with your child. "Many children hide their feelings from their parents because they feel they'll be hurting and overburdening them with their emotions," says Joan E. Massaquoi, a divorce mediator and psychotherapist in private practice in Chicago. "They feel that if they open up to their parents, they will be putting more stress on them. They keep everything locked inside because they feel the need to protect their parent."

In the meantime

While some children make it through their parents' divorce relatively easily, others can feel the after-effects of a divorce for months and even years later, suffering socially, emotionally, and academically. The reasons some children cope better than others are as varied as the children themselves. However, research indicates that the lasting effects of divorce on children usually occur when a divorce is particularly difficult. If parents are fighting and are filled with anger and hurt, they generally don't supply their kids with the kind of consistent care they need -- especially at emotionally trying times. Experts agree that the best way parents can help their children cope with a divorce is to plan from the outset to keep the hostility and bitterness to a minimum before, during, and after the actual divorce proceedings. "Try to reassure them that although there are going to be changes in their lives, the changes won't all be bad," says Anderson. "Take their concerns seriously and provide them with lots of reassurance of your love for them."

Above all, remember that you can't make your children happy, or speed up their grieving process. Provided with support, love, and consistent care, most children eventually adjust to divorce by themselves.

-- *Files from Sabrina Toucinho*