

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at the effect that divorce or separation of parents might have on children and young people, and offers practical advice on how to ease this.

Introduction

Over half of couples divorcing in the UK in 2007 had at least one child aged under 16. This meant that there were over 110,000 children who were aged under 16 when their parents divorced. 20% of these children were under 5 years old. However, many more children go through parental separation each year that are not included in figures like this, as their parents were not married.

When parents no longer love each other and decide to live apart, a child can feel as if their world has been turned upside down. The level of upset the child feels can vary depending on how their parents separated, the age of the child, how much they understand, and the support they get from parents, family and friends.

How are children affected?

A child may feel:

- A sense of loss - separation from a parent can mean you lose not only your home, but your whole way of life
- Different, with an unfamiliar family
- Fearful about being left alone - if one parent can go, perhaps the other will do the same
- Angry at one or both parents for the relationship breakdown
- Worried about having caused the parental separation: guilty
- Rejected and insecure
- Torn between both parents.

These feelings are often made worse by the fact that many children have to move home and sometimes school when parents separate, and most families in this situation come under some financial strain, even if they did not have money worries before.

Even if the parental relationship had been very tense or violent, children may still have mixed feelings about the separation. Many children hold onto a wish that their parents may get back together.

It is important not to pull your child into the conflict. The following tips may be useful.

Don't:

- Ask your child to take sides: 'Who would you like to live with, darling?'
- Ask your child what the other parent is doing
- Use your child 'as a weapon' to get back at your ex-partner
- Criticise your ex-partner
- Expect your child to take on the role of your ex-partner.
- Whatever has gone wrong in the relationship, both parents still have a very important part to play in their
- Child's life.

Emotional and behavioural problems

Emotional and behavioural problems in children are more common when their parents are fighting or separating. Children can become very insecure. Insecurity can cause children to behave like they are much younger and therefore bedwetting, 'clinginess', nightmares, worries or disobedience can all occur. This behaviour often happens before or after visits to the parent who is living apart from the family. Teenagers may show their distress by misbehaving or withdrawing into themselves. They may find it difficult to concentrate at school.

What can I do to help?

Parents who are separating can help their children. They should:

- make sure that the children know they still have two parents who love them, and will continue to care for them;
- protect their children from adult worries and responsibilities;
- Make it clear that the responsibility for what is happening is the parents' - and not the children's'.

These things will help your child:

- Be open and talk. Your child not only needs to know what is going on, but needs to feel that it's OK to ask questions.
- Reassure them that they will still be loved and cared for by both parents.
- Make time to spend with your child.
- Be reliable about arrangements to see your child.
- Show that you are interested in your child's views, but make it clear that parents are responsible for the decisions.
- Carry on with the usual activities and routines, like seeing friends and members of the extended family.
- Make as few changes as possible. This will help your child feel that, in spite of the difficulties, loved ones still care about them and that life can be reasonably normal.

If you are finding it difficult to help your child cope, you may want to seek outside help. Your general practitioner will be able to offer support and advice. Some families may need specialist help from the local **child and adolescent mental health service**. However, if managed sensitively, most children can adapt well to their new circumstances and do not have difficulties in the longer term.

References

- **The Mind: A User's Guide:** Editor Raj Persaud, Bantam Press, 2007.
- **The Young Mind:** An essential guide to mental health for young adults, parents and teachers, Bantam Press, 2009.
- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) '*What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*'. London: Brunner Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) '*Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*' (4th edn). London: Blackwell.

Sources of further information

- **The Children's Society** produces a series of leaflets for children and parents.
- **Citizens Advice Bureaux** Your local branch is listed in the telephone directory.
- **Divorce Aid** is one of the UK's largest websites on divorce. Run by an independant group of professionals it provides advice, support and information on all aspects of divorce. It has specialised sections for both young childrens and teenagers, enabling them to recognise and deal with emotions that arise from seperation and divorce.
- **National Family Mediation** is an organisation specifically set up to help families who are separating. It has a useful booklist, which includes books for children of different ages.
- **Parentline** offers help and advice to parents on bringing up children and teenagers.
- **Relate** helps couples with relationship difficulties.
- **Young Minds Parents Helpline** for any adult concerned about the emotions and behaviour of a child or young person. They offer information and professional advice, via telephone and email – contact 0800 018 2138 or parents@youngminds.org.uk
- Or check out this website designed for children: www.itsnotyourfault.org.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk or you can download them from this website.

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