

Impacts of Divorce Throughout the Developmental Stages

The clinical manifestations of divorce in children depend on many variables, including the child's age; the predivorce level of the family's psychosocial functioning; the parents' ability in the midst of their own anger, loss, and discomfort to focus on their child's feelings and needs; and the child's temperament and temperamental fit of parents with their children.

Infants and children younger than 3 years may reflect their caregivers' distress, grief, and preoccupation; they often show irritability, increased crying, fearfulness, separation anxiety, sleep and gastrointestinal problems, aggression, and developmental regression.

At 4 to 5 years of age, children often blame themselves for the breakup and parental unhappiness, become more clingy, show externalizing behavior (acting out), misperceive the events of the divorce situation, fear that they will be abandoned, and have more nightmares and fantasies.

School-aged children may be moody or preoccupied; show more aggression, temper, and acting-out behavior; seem uncomfortable with gender identity; and feel rejected and deceived by the absent parent. School performance may decrease, and they may agonize about their divided loyalties and feel that they should be punished.

Adolescents may feel decreased self-esteem and may develop premature emotional autonomy to deal with negative feelings about the divorce and their deidealization of each parent. Their anger and confusion often lead to relationship problems, substance abuse, decreased school performance, inappropriate sexual behavior, depression, and aggressive and delinquent behavior.

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Helping Children and Families Deal With Divorce and Separation

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