

A LINE ON LIFE

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Helping Children to Deal with Divorce *

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Even the easiest divorce has negative effects on everyone involved – especially the children. How can parents help their children to adjust more easily to the stress of divorce? Who should be given custody of the children?

In recent times, the courts in the United States have typically awarded custody of any children to the mother – unless she was obviously an unfit person. If the mother wanted the father to have custody of the children, she was regarded with disapproval by the society. Essentially she was seen as being "*uncaring*" and not what a mother "*should be*." Is the mother typically better fit to raise the child? Is father custody a feasible alternative?

In 1983, a study designed to answer these questions was completed. It was called the **Texas Custody Research Project**. The study compared the adjustments of both boys and girls whose custody was given to the father after the divorce with other children:

1. whose custody was awarded to the mother
2. who lived with intact families.

One finding was that children living with the *same-sex* parent showed more competent social development. When analyzed further, a sex difference appeared only for father-custody children. In other words, boys in father-custody homes were rated as more mature than boys from intact families, but girls in father-custody homes were rated lower in maturity than girls from intact families. In contrast, the rating of children from mother-custody homes did not differ from those of children who lived with both parents. In general, children living with the same-sex parent seem to do better than children living with the opposite sex parent.

This study is not sufficient to use as the sole basis for a court custody decision. Even so, it does suggest that there is something very important about an ongoing relationship with the same-sex parent.

***Divorce is stressful for everyone involved,
but you can reduce the stress on the children.***

There is a lack of long-term research data to provide suggestions to minimize the effects of divorce on children. However, the clinical experience of many therapists and

counselors has provided some ideas that may help parents to "*soften the blow*" of a divorce for children.

1. Tell the children ahead of time. Once the decision of divorce is certain, the children should be told – even if they already seem to be aware of the fact. This allows them to prepare better for one of the parents being absent.

2. Tell the children the reasons why the decision was made. It should be a brief and honest explanation that is suitable for the age of the child. This explanation will help to prevent the child from believing that s/he was the cause of the breakup. Unfortunately, this belief occurs relatively frequently among children of divorce.

3. Emphasize that the divorce is a permanent decision. Even though it may be more of a hope than a belief, children commonly believe that their parents will eventually get together.

4. Explain what changes will occur in the child's life. These changes may include moving, a new school, or having less money to spend. It helps to emphasize the positive aspects and the challenge of adapting to a new situation.

5. Allow the children to feel free to verbally express their emotions – including anger. If the parent can adequately deal with these expressions, this is an effective way to prevent long-term problems. On the other hand, this does not mean that the parent should turn around and use the children as a "*dumping ground*" for their own feelings of anger and despair. Instead, they should share their feelings with an adult friend. If no friend is available, a therapist or counselor can be very helpful.

6. Avoid forcing the child to choose between the parents or take sides. This tends to put the child in a terrible conflict. If the child loves both parents, any choice of one parent is seen as an intolerable rejection of the other. A priority for both parents should be continued contact with the children. To this end, the parents need to agree on custody and visitation rights that are fair to both parents. (A major problem is compromising between what each parent views as being "*fair*.")

7. Within the limits of the situation, continue the effective routines and discipline that were used before the divorce. In a period of disruption, stress and change, this gives the child something extra that s/he can depend on. Too many parents try to reduce their guilt feelings – or buy the child's love – by giving extra privileges or gifts.

At best, the period after divorce is a stressful time. However – rather than merely leading to problems – any crisis can be an opportunity for new growth. I hope these suggestions will help the children of divorce to experience this new growth.

* Adapted from Smith, Sarason & Sarason's *Psychology: The Frontiers of Behavior*, Harper & Row, 1986, pp. 443-445.