

Understanding How Divorce Affects Preschoolers and What You Can Do to Help

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Introduction: To a child, the divorce of their parents can be likened to a tornado that strikes their lives and leaves destruction and havoc in its wake. Nothing is ever the same again. The divorce will affect the child for many years to come.

How Divorce Affects Preschool Age Children <https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/259>

Signs of distress

- Exhibits regression in skills already mastered such as toilet training, sucking their thumb
- Child may experience separation anxiety and cling to a parent or care giver
- Younger preschool age children will whine, whimper or cry
- Most young children will be fearful because they no longer feel safe
- May experience nightmares
- May experience sleeping problems such as not being able to go to sleep
- Some will experience eating problems

How Divorce Affects Infants and Toddlers <https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/222>

Signs of distress

- Infants and toddlers are likely to be fussy and demanding.
- They want to be held and comforted.
- There may be changes in not only their disposition but in eating, toileting and sleeping habits such as
 - Become picky eaters
 - Have more soiled diapers
 - Sleeping sporadically
- Some will regress in some of the skills they had previously learned.

Helping the parent help the child transition to divorce

- Maintain a consistent routine
- Be gentle and calm with a smile on your face when talking to your child
- Be reassuring by using a soft voice
- Tell the child she is safe
- Tell the child often that he is loved
- Play and cuddle with the preschooler often
- If possible keep visitation schedules consistent

- When child goes to visit the other parent, be encouraging and upbeat. Send something of yours that has your scent on it such as a T-shirt. Spray the cologne or aftershave you wear on the article. Send favorite blanket or toy.
- Work with the other parent and communicate regularly
- Some children act out with the parent they live but not with the parent who has left. Be extra vigilant about schedules and boundaries and discipline.

Things to be aware of

- Many times children will be the first clue that something is wrong in the marriage
 - They may be sick more with ear infections being the most common
 - May have a lot of stomach aches
 - Whiny and crying when nothing is wrong
 - May act out parental fights/arguments using items in the block area, home living or in play outside
 - Draw or paint angry/sad people
 - Clingy to adults

Tips for caring for the preschool age child in preschool (and other church classes)

Arrival times

- Realize preschoolers may come in late and many times disgruntled
- Be consistent with preschool's schedule
- If possible visit the child in the home periodically to reassure the child you care
- Have the same teacher greet the child each time upon arrival and gently move the child away from the parent and into the room (Do not have the parent sneak away as this adds to the child's insecurity. The parent should always tell the child goodbye.)
 - Encourage the parent to have the child walk into the room
 - If the parent carries the child, encourage the parent to carry the child with the child's back to the parent so the child can see into the room
 - Teach the parent to physically hand the child over to the teacher by putting the child's hand into the teacher's hand
- Dealing with separation anxiety: Use the key trick. Parent brings a key to their home (or a dummy key) and allows the child to wear the key on a chain around their neck.
- Have parent that brings the child set up a goodbye ritual. The teacher that accepts the child develops a "hello" ritual.

Behavior and Discipline

- Preschoolers who are stressed will act out and will need boundaries. They do not need TIME OUT. Many feel isolated and lonely; placing them in time out away from everyone only serves to deepen the loneliness and fear.
- Allow children to “take a break” by providing a place away from other children where the child can look at book or hold a soft blanket and still see what everyone is doing.
- Help children label their emotions, i.e. “Seems to me you are sad today.”
- When labeling emotions, describe what their body looks like, i.e. “Your shoulders are going like this and your face is scrunched up like this.”
- Allow children to contribute to the environment by doing “jobs” at school.

Environment

- Realize many children come from chaotic environments and they will bring that chaos into your group. Keep a smile on your face and be organized. Keep clutter in the room to a minimum.
- Items in your class
 - Always have dress up clothes or both genders so children can role-play their parents. Listen to the conversations the child has with others. You’ll learn a lot about what is going on in the home.
 - Block area with different kinds of family characters, i.e. farm animals, zoo animals, sea life, people families, etc.
 - Big doll houses with family characters.
 - Sand tables along with various types of characters and small items to use in the sand. The cheap toys at the dollar stores work great for this. Wedding cake toppers are great too.
 - Bubble blowing items, group and individual bubble blowing items.
 - Have extra supplies available so the preschooler can make two items, one for each home.

Personal areas

- Realize many preschoolers will regress in their skills with the most prominent being toileting accidents. Be prepared by always having extra sets of clothes.
- While under stress some preschoolers will be very clumsy. They will spill food and drinks on themselves and others. Always have extra clean up supplies like extra paper towels on hand.
- Allow the child to bring something from home to wear or keep near them.
- Encourage the child to bring pictures of the parents/family. They can keep them in a wallet/purse or even hang them in a special place.
- If the child asks, “Where is daddy (or mommy)?” Simply say, “Daddy is at work or wherever the parent is.”
- Communicate often with the parent who brings the child to class and with permission from that parent, send invitations and notes about the preschooler to the other parent.

- Provide many cross midline and cross lateral activities to help the brain calm and focus.
- If possible always have a “lap” available for the child that just needs someone to hold him or even rock him.

Compliment the single parent for bringing his/her child to preschool. If grandma or another relative brings the child, encourage them also. Single parents of preschoolers need encouragement. They need acceptance and they need for you to understand they are doing the best they can at the moment.

Reassure the single parent you are going to provide a loving and caring place for the child. Communicate with the single parent through text messages. Single parents lead a busy and often hectic life. Most don't have time for long conversations or emails but they do need to know there is hope for their situation and there are people who care.

*For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my **hope** is from him. Psalm 62:5*

Resources

<https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/2609> How do I help a single parent with a child who screams when being left on Sunday mornings?

<https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/4695> A preschool child questions, “Where did he go?”

<https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/2459> What should I say when a child asks where his father who disappeared at birth is?

<https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/2247> Divorce hurts kids – literally divorce hurts

<https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/4196> How to retain (or attract) divorcing families to your church—and why it's important

<https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/2508> Question of the week: How do I answer questions from a parent who is in the middle of divorce conflict?

https://www.dc4k.org/downloads/dc4k/library/Preschool_age_children_Rev.pdf Preschool age children and divorce (for the parents)

<https://blog.dc4k.org/archives/100> How Divorce Affects Children

<http://www.careleader.org/classroom-size-causing-problems-kids/> How classroom layout affects kids

<http://www.careleader.org/parental-alienation-real/> “Mommy said Daddy is evil”

<http://www.careleader.org/3-surprising-reasons-kids-misbehave/> 3 surprising reasons kids misbehave