

HOW CONFLICT IMPACTS CHILDREN

“Skills for Cooperative Parenting” UCONN/Humphrey Clinic

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: INFANTS (Birth to 9 months)

- Infants understand sensory input but cannot process what is happening to them with language or reason.
- Infants depend on caregivers to understand the world. In a secure environment they internalize a sense of safety and know that they can rely on their caregiver(s) to protect them. They develop a sense of themselves as they see how they affect their parents (make them smile, laugh)
- Infants commonly show signs of distress when parents argue or become emotionally disconnected for long periods of time
- When day-to-day routines are changed or familiar caregivers are not around, infants can feel insecure and have difficulty settling down

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF DISTRESS

- Extreme fussiness, crying or the opposite, listlessness
- Developmental delays, such as not beginning to roll over, sit up, reach for things
- Significant changes in appetite, sleep

SUGGESTIONS

- Find outlets to support yourself when you are angry or grieving, and use them to help you to calm down so that you can be calm around your baby
- Have routines in your home that are consistent and provide security for yourself and your baby
- Be aware of transitions and not overloading your baby with too much stimulation
- Stay conscious about how much time your distress takes away from being present for your baby
- Know that your baby gets information about the world from your actions and emotions, be aware of the messages you are sending

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: TODDLERS (18 months to age 3)

- Toddlers are very aware of parents fighting and respond by acting out or trying to make the arguing stop in whatever way they can (crying, mischief, comforting)
- Toddlers feel unsafe/stressed when their parent is unsafe or stressed
- Toddlers think that they are in control of everything and are responsible for any tension in the home. This is called “magical thinking” and is normal developmentally. Children this age do not have the vocabulary to explain what they are feeling or to understand that they are not the cause of the argument
- Routine and predictability provide security. When these things are interrupted, toddlers feel uneasy, stressed and sometimes afraid.

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF DISTRESS

- Going back to an earlier developmental stage. For example, they may have bathroom accidents, want to go back to wearing diapers, want their bottle or pacifier again, go back to sleeping in a crib
- Withdrawal from people, or become extremely clingy and not able to be away from their caregiver
- Disturbances of sleeping and eating
- Develop fears about things that they are not normally afraid of

SUGGESTIONS

- Allow some of the old behaviors patiently while gently encouraging them to do the things that you know that they are capable of
- Avoid shaming them or over-reacting with punishing behavior
- Acknowledge fears, react calmly
- Remind them about things/people that are safe (their room, toys, caregivers, transitional objects), without excessive attention to negative experiences
- Maintain calm predictable routines in your home, and if you can agree on a single transitional routine between homes, this may help
- Avoid negative comments about, complaints or criticism of the child’s other parent in their presence regardless of whether you are happy or unhappy about the other parent’s household. Children will respond to your emotional climate.
- Listen to your child talk about their other household if they bring it up without reacting negatively, use curiosity as a response and repeat what they say so they know you have heard them.
- Avoid questioning them aggressively about their other household or seeming anxious to know what their other parent is doing.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: PRE-SCHOOLERS (age 3-5)

- They may believe that they are the cause of the divorce (magical thinking)
- They may feel frightened by the changes in their world and fear that they will be abandoned by one or both parents
- They may fear that they will not see the parent who moved out of the home
- They may attempt to get their parents back together or wish the divorce away

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF DISTRESS

- Say things that indicate they feel responsible for the divorce or their parents
- Become clingy with their parent, not want to play or explore their world, isolate from other children and family members
- Bed wetting, sucking thumb, using baby talk, temper tantrums
- Become bossy and attempt to control everyone and everything. This is likely your child's attempt to create security when they feel things are chaotic.
- Increased anger

SUGGESTIONS

- Explain that getting a divorce is sometimes what grown-ups choose to do when they believe that they can't get along when they live together. Parents will always stay parents no matter whether there is a divorce or not. Divorce doesn't get caused by children but is always a decision by the grown-ups. Parents can get mad at kids sometimes, but parents do not divorce kids, divorce is for grown-ups.
- Try to keep children's relationships and routines with each parent positive and similar to the relationship they had before the divorce, with minimal change if possible. Keep exposure to toxic and unhappy interactions between their parents as minimal as possible.
- Gently re-direct clingy or bossy behavior by acknowledging it, without shaming the child. Example: "I know you would like me to not go to work today, but grown-ups have to go to their jobs! I'll think of you today and see you when I pick you up from grandma's."
- Respond or acknowledge the emotion rather than getting into a power struggle about the behavior. Example: A child says they don't want to leave dad's house at visitation transfer, "I know you're sad to leave dad's house, you must have had a lot of fun! I know you miss him when you're at my house, we will make sure to call him when we get there."
- Avoid getting emotional or upset while you transition your child to their other parent. Have support for yourself in some form so that your child doesn't feel responsible for your feelings. Remind them that you will see them again soon.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: EARLY ELEMENTARY (age 6-9)

- They may have strong feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness
- They may miss their other parent
- They may have difficulty concentrating at school, grades may suffer
- They may fear that parent(s) will stop loving them, test parent(s) by acting out
- Sometimes children side with one parent to simplify their loyalty conflicts, to “take care” of a parent they believe depends on them or to appease a parent who has difficulty dealing with their other parent
- Children may provide emotional support for a parent who is suffering and believe that they have the ability to “make the parent happy again.” This puts a tremendous burden on a child.

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF DISTRESS

- A significant change in grades or attitude about school
- Consistent sadness or frequent crying, lack of enthusiasm
- Physical symptoms like frequent headaches, stomach aches
- Loss of pleasure in play and interacting with peers

SUGGESTIONS

- Allow the child to express their sad feelings without taking it personally
- Keep visitation schedules consistent and predictable
- Develop routines around schoolwork and avoid shaming child about school performance
- Keep up activities with peers and encourage success, don't punish with removing pleasurable activities that motivate the child
- Have a good support system and self-care strategy for yourself and let your child see you using it
- Allow your child to understand that you have sad or angry feelings at times, that this is normal and they are not responsible for managing your feelings.
- Share playful, fun and non-academic focused activities with your child
- Encourage play dates with peers, extended family and after-school/community activities

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: LATER ELEMENTARY (age 9-12)

- Conflict over what they want for themselves and others
- Feelings of being torn between parents, loyalty conflicts
- Anger at one or both parents for leaving, divorcing or “making mistakes”
- Ashamed or embarrassed about divorce. Any public display of parental disagreement is extremely uncomfortable for children.
- Worry about parents and feel responsible for their well-being

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF DISTRESS

- Apathy, poor school performance, conflicts with peers and/or teachers
- Physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, apathy
- Premature sexual activity
- Taking on an adult role with their single parent. This puts adult pressure on a child who is developmentally not able to handle it. Children might side with one parent to simplify the conflicts about loyalty and then feel guilty about it. Children also feel angry when they are forced to choose between the two most important people in their lives. They may resent the parent they show loyalty to later for preventing their relationship with their other parent.

SUGGESTIONS

- Keep open communication with your child and allow them to talk about happy and positive experiences with their other parent
- Allow them to be angry with you and to express it respectfully
- Encourage relationships with school, teachers, friends, extended family and support positive ways to resolve conflict respectfully
- Keep your own support network strong so that you can talk about parenting challenges with another adult who will help you to not react any of your child’s messy feelings with anger or shame
- Enjoy playful, loving, fun activities with your child and encourage them to contribute to the family in age appropriate ways
- Continue to hold your child accountable, don’t let bad behavior go because you feel guilty or sorry about the divorce
- Find ways for your child to negotiate with you and create win-win situations
- Try to keep routines predictable re: getting up, meals, play, homework and sleep
- Remind yourself and your child that it is not necessary to “choose” one parent, but that each parent has unique gifts to contribute to their lives—sometimes even in the form of struggles. Focus on positive aspects of the relationship
- Avoid speaking negatively about your child’s other parent. Rejection of the other parent is often perceived as a rejection of part of your child and can create confusion and fear.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: ADOLESCENCE (age 13-18)

- They may feel anxiety about leaving home or feel responsible for the divorce
- They may worry about plans for the future and worry that there isn't enough money to carry them out
- They may feel rejected or neglected by a parent who doesn't see them
- They may feel confused or burdened by a parent's dependence on them
- They may resent their parents for the losses the divorce caused
- They may feel embarrassed or ashamed about conflicts between parents

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF DISTRESS

- Leaving home, moving out earlier than planned
- Talk of delaying their plans so they can be at home to help out
- Fear about leaving home because there will be no home to come back to
- Criticism of one or both parents
- Increased sexual behavior or aggression
- Substance abuse, fights at school, defiant behavior, running away from home, sudden drop in school performance, withdrawal from activities and friends, self-injury, problems with the law

SUGGESTIONS

- Keep communication open with your teen by acknowledging their feelings without over-reacting with punishment. Avoid taking things personally or losing self-control. Offer guidance, teach critical thinking and problem solving
- Show your child your values through your example. Expect them to want to negotiate new rules that help them to test their wings.
- Keep your own adult support network strong
- Encourage and know about your child's activities and relationships with friends. Coordinate your parenting decisions with the child's other parent as best you can. When disagreements happen, do your best to let go of issues that are not related to safety or important values
- Create routines/traditions at your home that are stable and predictable so that your teen knows that you can be counted on.
- Avoid second-guessing your child's other parent as this invites manipulation from your child. Attempt to directly discuss important decisions with their other parent. "End-runs" tend to put your child in the middle of your conflict.
- Have a direct relationship with your teen that isn't based on angst about their other parent. Your child will base their relationship with you on their experience of you, don't spend and lose your time with your child by speculating about your child's other parent.

Adapted from information posted here:

<http://www.divorcehelpforparents.com/developmental-stage.html>

MORE RESOURCES

<http://alankazdin.com/>

<http://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>

<http://parentfurther.com/>

<https://www.positiveparentingct.com/author/ruth-freeman/>