

# Divorce & Children

by Caroline Dale

Parental separation is a pretty common phenomenon among families in Australia and New Zealand. Although rates of divorce have been dropping steadily since they peaked in 2001, there were over 44 000 divorces granted in Australia in 2007 and almost 50% of those involved children under the age of 18<sup>1</sup>.

The time surrounding divorce is usually thick with emotional stress, psychological confusion, relationship strain and life upheaval for both children and their parents. In the lead up to parental separation, home life is usually fraught with conflict and tension. While this may dissipate somewhat when one parent leaves the home, many new factors and emotions enter into the situation. Children may feel some guilt over their parents' separation, or may focus their blame on just one parent. The relationship between children and their non-residential parent – often the father – can grow distant. Their relationship with the residential parent may become strained as that parent struggles with new pressures and their own burdens. Financial issues may occur or increase and lead to yet more changes like moving house or school<sup>2</sup>.

Most children do adjust adequately to the dramatic changes in their lives; on average, children of divorced parents rate only slightly lower on measures of mental health than those whose parents are still together<sup>3</sup>. Despite their successful life functioning, children often express resentment, regret, longing or disappointment about the divorce.

Outside of maintaining good relationships with both parents, social supports offer the best buffer for children and young people experiencing parental separation. Siblings, friends, neighbours, community or faith centres and schools can be incredibly important protective factors, and teenagers typically find in their peers friendships a particularly important buffer<sup>4</sup>. Positive school experiences, especially during pre-adolescence and adolescence, help build children's coping and life skills. Teachers, coaches, counsellors and of course *Seasons for Growth* Companions can be invaluable resources in helping a child to adjust to the many changes that come with a significant family upheaval.


Research indicates that the first 2-3 years following the divorce are the hardest for children, but that the impact continues to be felt through their youth and young adulthood. Each child and adolescent will react differently to the separation of their parents. Personality and temperament factors, as well as existing relationships with parents and family, are significant predictors of how they will interpret the situation and what emotions and behaviours they are liable to express. Age and developmental stage will also inform their readiness to understand the nature and consequences of complex relationships and the implications of relationship breakdown. Here is a general guide to understanding and supporting school-aged children and through their parents' separation<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>ABS Report Divorces 2007 (Catalogue number 3307.0.55.001)

<sup>2,3</sup>Haggerty Robert J. (1996) *Stress, risk, and resilience in children and adolescents: processes, mechanisms and interventions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

<sup>4</sup>Ahrons, Constance. *We're Still Family*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.



Age	How might they react?	What can we do?
<p><b>Primary</b></p> <p><i>Children begin to understand what divorce means.</i></p> <p><i>They believe that their parents don't love each other and know they won't be living together any longer.</i></p>	<p><b>Children may...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* feel deceived.</li> <li>* feel an acute sense of loss for the parent who moved away.</li> <li>* hope their parents will reunite.</li> <li>* feel rejected by the absent parent.</li> <li>* become depressed, show changes in eating and sleeping, lack of interest in life, poor concentration, crying, irritability and withdrawal, or a sense of hopelessness.</li> <li>* fear abandonment, or may worry about their parents' future wellbeing as well as their own.</li> <li>* fear not being picked up on time by noncustodial parent.</li> <li>* show symptoms of physical illness.</li> <li>* become extremely angry with both parents about the divorce.</li> <li>* direct their anger outward eg challenging behaviour, or inward, eg feelings of shame or self-blame.</li> </ul>	<p><b>We can...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* encourage children to talk about the divorce.</li> <li>* be sensitive to signs of depression, fear, and troubled behaviour. Know who to turn to if we believe professional help is needed.</li> <li>* help children feel that life will be OK and that their world is secure.</li> <li>* Encourage parents to talk to other adults, not their child, about adult problems such as money issues, unresolved feelings, work stress, etc.</li> <li>* ensure that the child's teacher is aware of the situation. The teacher can provide support and watch for signs that the child may need additional help.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Preteens and Adolescents</b></p> <p><i>They understand, but often do not accept, separation or divorce.</i></p>	<p><b>Preteens and teens may...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* become very angry.</li> <li>* feel disillusioned, betrayed, or rejected by one or both of their parents. They may lose trust in relationships in general.</li> <li>* may lose self-esteem or worry about being loved.</li> <li>* be highly moralistic and critical, and may judge their parents' decision to divorce harshly.</li> <li>* be embarrassed or disturbed by any change in their parents' sexual behaviour.</li> <li>* become more intense in the risk taking and rebellion that is normal at this age - shoplifting, using drugs, becoming sexually active, skipping school, etc.</li> <li>* become depressed or withdrawn, or may threaten suicide.</li> <li>* may behave much better, not worse, feeling that if their behaviour improves they can save their parents' marriage.</li> <li>* may find their sense of independence disrupted. They may be afraid to separate from their parents or feel a strong need to align with one parent.</li> </ul>	<p><b>We can...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* give them time to discuss their feelings. We can suggest positive ways to handle feelings. If children have difficulty talking with their parents, encourage them to confide in another trusted adult such as a relative, family friend, teacher, or guidance counsellor.</li> <li>* maintain established routines as much as possible.</li> <li>* emphasise that although the family may be changing, they must continue to show respect for both parents, must follow house rules, must do their best in school, etc.</li> <li>* Reassure them that they are not responsible for their parents' happiness and that they do not need to become the "man" or "woman" of the house in the absence of either their father or mother.</li> </ul> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>

<sup>5</sup>Oesterreich, L. (1996). *Divorce matters series: A child's view*. National Network for Child Care. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Extension.