

## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

### Preschool (1-4 years)

Developmental Tasks: becoming an individual; gaining autonomy; establishing safe separation from parents and other caretakers; physiological stabilization; bonding to one or more parental figures; development of trust and security; exploring one's own environment from a secure place; deepening attachment to caretakers.

Needs/Interests: firm limits and support; secure, patient caretakers; verbal explanations and reassurances repeated; consistent and frequent contact with both parents; routines, help in verbalizing feelings.

Parental Responses: parents should realize that preschoolers need a lot of reassurance backed up by real happenings. They need to see mommy or daddy regularly. Parents should spend a lot of one-on-one time with their preschoolers and reassure them that mommy/daddy love them.

Characteristic Thoughts/Feelings/Behaviors When Parents Separate/Divorce: "Mom/Dad left me"; "My family is gone"; "Mom's going to leave me too"; "I won't ever see Dad again"; "Who will take care of me now?"

Danger Signals: .

#### Infancy:

- Sleeping, eating, and digestion problems
- Fretfulness and crying that seems excessive
- Failure to gain weight and to thrive
- Unresponsiveness, apathy
- Seems unreasonably or unpredictably upset by changes in caretakers or environment

#### Six months to eighteen months:

- Same as above one through four
- Fearful reaction to non-residential parent (indicates lack of attachment)
- Delayed development
- Night terrors

#### Toddlers:

- Regression - return to safer time
- Developmental lags
- Fear of separation, clinging, whining
- Excessive masturbation
- Excessive aggression
- Frequent and severe temper tantrums

### Preschoolers:

- Withdrawal and depression
- Eating and sleeping disturbances
- Crying for long periods after leaving one parent
- Delays in toilet training
- Regressive behaviors - seems to have lost skills previously possessed
- Seemingly very needy for attention, e.g. demanding to sleep with a parent
- Too good, over compliant
- Too serious, emotionally constricted
- Denial
- Inability to concentrate

The preschooler is primarily fearful, confused, and feels guilty. He or she does not really understand what is happening and may feel that one parent is leaving because he or she has been naughty. In terms of behavior, the preschooler may regress and begin bedwetting or day-time wetting; he or she may have difficulty sleeping and/or eating; he or she may wake up often in the night with nightmares. The preschooler may become very aggressive toward age-mates or may become very passive and almost withdrawn. Parents need to reassure them that mommy/ daddy will return regularly and that he/she loves them still.

### **Early Childhood (3-7 years)**

Developmental Tasks: developing initiative; managing impulse; sex role identifications; developing peer relationships.

Needs/Interests: clear parental roles/values; parental cooperation; frequent, continuing contact with the same sex parent; predictable contacts; reassurance of love.

Parental Responses: children in this age group need to be reassured that they are loved by both of their parents.

Characteristic Thoughts/Feelings/Behaviors When Parents Separate/Divorce: "I'm to blame"; "I'll get them back together"; "I have to choose one parent"; "If I don't talk about it, it will be okay."

### Danger Signals:

- Increased anxiety, restlessness, over-activity
- Increased moodiness, tantrums, aggression
- School problems - acting out
- Childhood depression, feels rejected
- Denial of all problems
- Intense, one-sided anger at the parent who is blamed for the separation/divorce
- Pseudo-adult, little man/woman role taking

Somatic complaints  
Increased restlessness  
Phobic fears  
Yearning for absent parent  
Passive/aggressive  
Low self-esteem

The children from ages five to eight or nine will do a lot of grieving. This age child will cry a lot and seem to be despairing for his or her absent parent. The child is very angry at the residential parent because he or she believes this parent was to blame for the other one leaving. This child also feels that the absent parent must not love him or her anymore because now he or she is gone. Research shows that children at this stage are most likely to believe that something "magical" will happen and mommy and daddy will get back together. They also feel responsible for taking care of their parent whom they see in a tremendous amount of pain.

Children in this age group are most likely influenced by what a parent tells them and seem most likely to be caught in the middle of their parents' battles. Parents need to reassure these children that both parents will still love them, even though the parents may no longer love each other.

### **Later Childhood (6-12 years)**

Developmental Tasks: gaining personal competence; freeing energy from family concerns in order to experience friends, school, industry, and play; developing logical thought; developing a sense of fairness.

Needs/Interests: stability/security at home to free energies; structured schedule; flexibility to allow for social time; lots of explanations; no school changes.

Parents' Responses: the best response to the older child is honesty and that you love and care for him or her. Acknowledge that your child has thoughts and feelings and encourage him or her to talk about them.

Characteristic Thoughts/Feelings/Behaviors When Parents Separate/Divorce: "I'm the only one this has happened to"; "I blame Mom/Dad"; "Who am I now without my family?"; "Who will be in charge here?"; "I'm responsible now"; "Can I love both parents?"

Included in this group are upper elementary and middle school age children. These children are more likely to understand some of what is happening in their family and why it has happened. In their desire not to make waves, they may deny their own distress. They are anxious at this age to take care of the residential parent and seem to be very sensitive to the anger that that parent may feel toward the other. Researchers show that a small percentage of these children may become an ally to one parent against the other parent. This age group has a tendency to see things as either black or white. These children may be very angry with both parents because of their parents' inability to act appropriately toward the other parent. This age group sees that the children are

disciplined for acting inappropriately and selfishly, yet the parents are acting this way themselves.

The older school age child has identity issues at this age as a natural course of development. These issues reach crisis proportions when a separation or divorce is involved. They are unsure of their own identity, and now the family, as they knew it, is no longer the way it was. Children at this age frequent doctors' offices with many physical ailments: headaches, stomachaches, asthma, and even infections. These symptoms can be linked directly to stress reactions.

Parents need to be honest about what is happening, how it will happen (the separation and/or divorce), and how, even though the parents are no longer able to live together, they will still be parents together and still both love and care for the child. Acknowledge that the child's feelings will include anger, and encourage him or her to talk about those feelings.

Be sure to alert the child's doctor and teachers about the changes going on in the family. It will help these important people in the child's life to have some understanding of what may be going on as regards schoolwork and the child's health.

### **Adolescence (12-18 years)**

Developmental Tasks: separation and independence; developing own identity; sexual identity; peer involvement; return to family for emotional refueling.

Needs/Interests: emotional stability/maturity from parents; adequate/flexible parental controls; meaningful contact with parents; low levels of parental conflict and control; consulted, informed, heard; extended times with a parent unnecessary.

Parents' Responses: Honesty is really the best policy with adolescents. They can understand that there are two sides to every story and no one has to put them in the middle. Parents should try to be neither over-protective nor assume that their teenager can cope by himself or herself while the rest of the family members are tended to.

Characteristic Thoughts/Feelings/Behaviors When Parents Separate/Divorce: "I'll act mature to cope"; "Why can't my parents get it together?"; "My parents' separation/divorce is no big deal"; "If I accept step-mom (dad), Mom (Dad) will be mad"; "I'm jealous of Dad's girlfriend"; "Mom's dating is gross!"; "Am I loveable?"; "Will I get divorced someday?"

### Danger Signals:

- Withdrawal from the family; perhaps withdrawal from peers
- Intense feelings of loss, helplessness, low self-esteem, depression, suicidal thoughts or feelings
- Uncontrollable anger and/or violence toward a parent
- Promiscuity
- Manipulation of one parent against another

- School problems - failure, truancy
- Substance abuse
- Pseudo-maturity for control
- Involvement with antisocial activities
- Denial
- Pessimism for own lovability in the future
- Competition or over-identification with parent

The adolescent, ages 13-18, is more developed intellectually and socially and, therefore, is probably better equipped to handle the separation/divorce at least as a life event. However, this age group is also very good at masking true feelings and acting as though they have it all under control. The teenager can see his or her parent's pain and doesn't want to add to it. He or she feels that parents should take care of themselves and that younger siblings and the teen can make do. What happens, however, is that adolescence is a time when children need consistency and discipline. With parents out of control, many teenagers are left to their own devices. Some just become adults quicker; others do not know what to do with their own feelings of anger and hurt, and they begin to act out. This can be a time when teenagers experiment with alcohol/drugs, promiscuity, and other types of inappropriate behavior.

The adolescent may have difficulty forming intimate relationships because of what he or she sees as failure when one trusts enough to marry and the marriage falls apart. Others will rush into marriage to escape the home situation or to prove that they can make it work. Still others are searching for the closeness that they feel they lost with their parents' separation/divorce. Teenagers should be given access to both parents at their discretion and allowed to develop and maintain a relationship defined by them and each of their parents independently of the other.

### **Adult Children (18-death)**

Developmental Tasks: establish one's place in the world; contribute to the well-being of society.

Needs/Interests: to be kept out of the middle, maintenance of the family hierarchy and parental responsibility.

Characteristic Thoughts/Feelings/Behaviors When Parents Separate/ Divorce: "If I go to Dad's house for Thanksgiving, Mom will feel rejected"; "I'll avoid both of them".