



Time Out!



Helping Children Cope with Separation and Divorce

By Bonnie Nay

Every year over a million children experience a parental divorce in the United States. Based on recent statistics, about half of all children will witness the breakup of their parents' marriage. Divorce and single parent homes have become a way of life in our society. Research indicates that divorce can have a negative impact on the behavior of children.

It is important to remember that many of the problems children experience following parental divorce are not due simply to the separation of their parents. To a large extent, children's adjustment following divorce depends on the situation existing after the divorce. Parents and child care providers can work together to help a child cope with and adjust to this change in their lives.

Small children are barometers of the emotional climate that surrounds them. If parents (or child care providers) are stressed out, overly emotional or overwhelmed the child or children will become more anxious and unsettled and begin to act out more. A child going through a major change in his/her life like the separation/divorce of parents will have an increased need for comfort and security. Children need to know that they will still be loved and taken care of. Repeated reassurance from the adults around them (given in both verbal and non-verbal ways) that "everything is going to be okay" will help them feel better. Parents and child care providers can reassure them and show them that they can continue to count on their parents to provide stability and love throughout their lives. Given the right support, a child will be able to express their feelings, grieve their loss and emerge from this unsettling time a stronger, more resilient person.

According to the book *The Emotional Life of the Toddler* by Alicia Lieberman, toddlers may have a particularly difficult time with the separation and divorce of their parents. Divorcing parents often hope that their little ones are barely aware of what is happening around them and therefore will not be as affected. But toddlers do notice and they form their notions of what is happening before they are able to talk.

"A few days of no contact with a parent can be far more unsettling for a toddler than for an older child, who has a better internalized image of the parent, more sophisticated coping mechanisms

(including language development, symbolic play and capacity to delay gratification) and a broader network of relationships and activities to help in withstanding the separation", said Lieberman. Toddlers will notice if a parent is absent from the home and may grieve without ever saying a word. Many children may harbor secret worries from a very early age that they do not or cannot put into words. It is up to the adults around them to try to recognize and understand their feelings and alleviate their concerns.

Toddlers and preschool children will act out their feelings of instability and may feel as if their world has been turned upside down. They may become more fearful or aggressive. They may show increased fear of separation, biting, increased bedwetting and/or a wish to regress back to being a baby (a "safer time" for them). They may show an increased need to control their environment because they feel out of control of what is going on around them.

These behaviors are in effect a "cry for help" asking the adults around them to pay attention and notice that something is wrong with them. They rely on adults to decode these messages and to respond to them. Lieberman said, "Sometimes the adult needs to glean the toddler's innermost feelings from the subtlest of cues," and, "Talking with the child, while the child is having these feelings, about missing Mommy or Daddy, being angry, or being scared enables the toddler to cope with these intense feelings without being overwhelmed." For all children going through a separation or divorce we need to pay attention to what they are telling us through their words and actions and help them learn to express and cope with their feelings. Here are some tips on how to make the best of a challenging situation:

1. Keep the child's schedule and routine the same as much as possible.
2. Make sure the child has his/her security objects and favorite toys available at both parent's homes to help with transitions.
3. Give the child attention, love and discipline.
4. Help them put their feelings into words, let them be honest and REALLY listen to them.
5. Be positive. Children tend to take clues from the adults around them as to how to react to different situations. Instead of being fearful about how the situation will affect the child, think about lessons that can be learned and expect that the kids will overcome the challenges with your support.
6. Encourage parents to seek help for themselves if needed. If they are "falling apart" themselves they will not be able to help their child.

Here are the titles of some children's books that might be helpful for children who are being affected by separation/divorce:

- *Two Homes* by Claire Masurel
- *Was It the Chocolate Pudding?* by Sandra Lewis
- *My Family's Changing* by Pat Thomas
- *Dinosaur's Divorce! A Guide for Changing Families* by Marc Brown and Laurie Krasny

Here are some books that parents going through a separation/divorce might find useful:

- *Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust* by Rex Forhand, Ph.D., and Nicholas Long, Ph.D.
- *Smart Parenting During and After Divorce: The Essential Guide to Making Divorce Easier on Your Child* by Peter Favaro
- *Families Apart* by Melinda Blau
- *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child* by Isolina Ricci



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THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAISE AND RAISING CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM

By Valerie Getsinger

There are many aspects to praising children. Praise is crucial for children to develop high self-esteem. Levels of self-esteem in children can be viewed as mirrors that show how children feel about themselves. Children will express how they feel about themselves in many ways, by what they say and through their behaviors. Praise is also an important factor for children to be able to see themselves as capable. With high self-esteem, children learn to relish independence, creating more opportunities for them to show initiative and develop confidence in themselves and their abilities.

It is also especially important to show children how to have positive behaviors by being an example and by modeling behaviors that you would like them to have. Saying "please" and "thank you" and "you're welcome" to children is one way to encourage the development of polite behaviors. It is also important to: listen to children, be interested and attentive, keep eye contact with the child, be sincere, encourage children to talk, and ask open-ended questions. In addition, encourage children's positive behaviors with praise. Some examples of praise are: "I'm so proud of you," "Way to go," "Nice work," "Great job" or "I knew you could do it."

Even how an infant is treated affects their self-esteem. It is important to comfort and smile back at infants. By doing this, infants will develop trust and feel safe and valued. These are all important aspects to developing high self-esteem, which begins at birth. Smiles, expressions and hugs given to toddlers (and children of all ages) are all influences on developing self-esteem. By the time a child goes to school, having high self-esteem helps them do well in school and make friends. Having high self-esteem is very important to the success of a child throughout his life.

Yelling and/or making a child feel bad or ashamed will create low self-esteem. What children are told early on will end up having an effect on their entire life. Effective ways to build self-esteem are to reward children, point out their successes, don't focus on the bad, have reasonable expectations, never make fun

STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES ...

Though we tell the children otherwise, words can definitely be harmful. This may be especially true for young children who are in the process of establishing their own identities and their own self-worth. Child care providers are often with a child more during the week than the child's parents or guardians are. Child care providers have the ability and the power to build and strengthen young children's self-esteem or to tear them down simply by the words they use. Why not make those words as positive as possible and build resilient children?! In the handout "Communication is the Key" from Teaching Tools for Young Children with Challenging Behavior, providers are given seven steps to follow to making communication positive and powerful:

1. Tell a child what to do instead of what not to do.
2. Show the child by modeling or using a picture of the action.
3. Clearly and simply state what you expect the child to do.
4. Remember young children use inappropriate behavior because they may not understand the social rules yet.
5. Talk to young children using language they understand. Young children may not understand words like "don't" because it is a short word for "do not" and he/she may not know what the "negation" of a word means.
6. Encourage the child in a way that lets him/her know that he/she is exhibiting the desired behavior.
7. Be enthusiastic and generous with encouragement. Children can never get enough!

of children, discuss problems without blaming, give children responsibility, offer children choices, let children know that you value what they do by taking an interest in their activities, hobbies, etc., as well as share time together on favorite activities, tell them they are terrific, and give them lots of hugs and love.

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Adapted from *Noodle Soup, 25 Ways to Praise and Your Child's Self-Esteem*, 2001 and 2003, Virginia Coalition for Child Abuse Prevention.

Lower Shore Early Intervention Program at the Lower Shore Child Care Resource Center



LOWER SHORE
EARLY INTERVENTION
PROGRAM

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We offer children, families, child care center staff, and family providers the following services and support:

- Assist children who are experiencing social-emotional, behavioral and/or developmental issues at child care.
- Assist parents in developing more effective parenting strategies at home.
- Group activities for children in child care to promote positive social-emotional growth.
- Trainings for child care providers and parents to increase knowledge of social-emotional development.
- Strategies and assistance for child care providers on promoting healthy social-emotional growth.
- Assist families seeking additional mental health resources in the community.
- Environment assessments to enhance healthy social-emotional growth and learning in the child care center.
- Devereux Early Childhood Assessments (DECAs)

Calling Our Warm Line: 410-677-6590



Our Warm Line is open Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. for anyone to call for information, suggestions and helpful strategies regarding young children's social and emotional development and behavior.

Making a Referral for Services

Call us at 410-677-6590 and provide some basic information on the child you think needs behavior intervention services. Once consent for services has been received by the child's parents/guardians, we will observe and assess the child then recommend and help implement behavior intervention strategies at the child care setting and at home.