

HOW DO I TELL THE KIDS ... ABOUT THE DIVORCE?

Special Bonus

Signals: Recognizing Signs of Conflict in Your Child

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Your child will be going through a lot of conflicts and feeling during stressful times such as divorce. The first step in helping him/her to cope is in being able to recognize various behaviors or "signals" that tell you something is wrong or needs attention. Remember, all behavior is purposeful. There is *always* a reason for what your child does (even if your child doesn't know it).

To discover the reason for your child's behavior, it is important to maintain the proper perspective. Take what your child says and does seriously, but not too *personally*. Many of the things that your child says or does will have nothing to do with you. It will simply be reflecting some of the difficulties that he/she will be feeling inside. It is only a signal – a secret way of telling you that he/she is troubled or in need of special attention. If you can see your child's behavior in this manner, it will be much easier for you to cope, help your child and feel much less aggravated.

Here are some of the most common "SIGNALS" which may indicate that something is troubling your child. Place a check mark for each one that applies.

[] REGRESSION to a safer, more secure and easier time of life. You may see behavior that is childish or that you haven't seen in quite a while suddenly return, such as crying, thumb sucking, wetting/soiling, tantrums, fears, baby talk, playing with outdated toys, wanting to sleep with you, acting helpless, forgetful, etc.

[] ACTING OUT or behaving in a "problematic" way to obtain needed attention, punish oneself, get back at you, express anger, or to divert negative attention away from parents and onto oneself in order to protect the parent's relationship (directing attention to oneself as the "problem" so as to reunite parents in a common cause), or having more "accidents" or illnesses to receive attention or unite parents. Occasionally, a child may run away from home, not only to receive attention but to express pain and anger and assure that they are really loved and will be missed.

[] FANTASY and/or DENIAL to escape the painful realities taking place; increased daydreaming, much television watching, "storytelling" or lying; and, hoping for and speaking about reconciliation of parents. Many children can only take the reality of divorce in small doses.

[] SADNESS and DESPAIR may take the form of moping, inactivity, easily being made to cry, running away, or pretending that everything is "just fine."

[] WITHDRAWAL into oneself, one's room, and one's own private world. ("If I get away from people and don't get close, then I won't get hurt.")

[] POOR GRADES are often a very good indication of concentration difficulties, hidden anxieties and stress.

[] OBSTINATE, stubborn, the refusal to do chores, school work or to follow family rules. Showing disrespect toward teachers and parents is a strong signal of underlying problems.

[] POOR PEER RELATIONS may be more than withdrawing from other children and take the form of fighting, teasing and an inability to get along or be liked by children of the same age. This is often an indication of poor self-esteem and a need for attention, approval and acceptance.

[] WORRYING about a parent's health, welfare, the loss of a parent (abandonment) and/or of family finances; or about someone breaking into the home (another intrusion into the security of the family) and theft (more loss); or about the future and being taken care of (the need for stability, consistency and love).

[] SEPARATION ANXIETY occurs when a child's sense of security, attachment or bond to a parent is threatened. It may signal the need for more quality time spent with a parent to strengthen the bond between them. Divorce creates an unstable situation with uncertainty regarding a parent's permanence and availability to the child. The younger and less mature the child, the less time away from the child's primary caregiver can be tolerated without anxiety.

[] OVERDEPENDENCY upon one or both parents, which is a kind of

"regression" by clinging to parents and wanting to be "taken care of" like the days of old (due to insecurity).

[] AGGRESSIVENESS toward other children, teachers, parents, animals, etc., as a way of dealing with anger and hurt.

[] INSECURITY may be dealt with by a child's use of a "security blanket" or other object like a Teddy Bear or pillow to help feel more secure during a time of transition. Many children will cling to a special item that represents an earlier stage of life for them as they make the transition to a newer way of living or next stage of development. This may signal insecurity, but is a natural process which makes "moving on" a little easier. Your acceptance and understanding of the use of a "transitional object" until your child is ready to "let go" will actually reassure your child that it's safe to grow up and to "move on." Allow this.

[] OVERLY COMPLIANT or being too good and too cooperative which may seem like a blessing to parents and a sign that things "really aren't that bad." However, this is also a "defense" just as the others mentioned and is still in response to self-blame, feeling the need to atone for causing the divorce by becoming "the good kid" and attempting to restore the family by "righting the wrong." This behavior often leads to repressed anger in the child and depression. It can also be a form of "denial" and pretending that all is well (all smiles). Remember, the term is OVERLY compliant -- the kid who is TOO good to be true, never upset and is always trying to please.

[] ANGER may take many forms, directed both inwardly (at oneself) or outwardly (toward others). It may lead to depression (turning the anger inward, toward oneself), rebelliousness, belligerence, aggressiveness, revenge (turning the anger outward), blame of self, teachers, things, events or the parent believed responsible for the divorce, and fear of retaliation and being abandoned (because of being angry). Angry children usually feel emotionally threatened in some way or have a strong need to defend or protect themselves.

[] DENIAL is an attempt to blot out any confusion, pain or other unwanted feelings or thoughts ("I don't have to deal with what doesn't exist."), and often goes with being "overly compliant." Some denial may be temporarily necessary so as not to feel overwhelmed. Sooner or later, however, most feelings are best talked about in an atmosphere of safety and trust when the

child is ready. Don't force your child to talk, but don't ignore important issues either. Give "gentle invitations" to talk regularly.

[] The WISH FOR RECONCILIATION is a constant theme among children of divorce and can last for many years, even after things have been resolved. It seems that the original family bonding is so strong, that even after a decade or more, children continue to have reconciliation fantasies or desires. Children may also try to "fix" the parent's relationship or try to be extra good so as to "win" reconciliation. It may be hard to believe that there is nothing that they can do to bring Mom and Dad back together.

[] Feeling AT FAULT (self-blame) for the divorce is a common reaction of children. Some may even "need" to feel responsible (guilty) as a way to atone and then, hopefully, rectify the "wrong" that is "their fault" (the divorce). Feeling "to blame" helps children feel less powerless by thinking they can atone and, therefore, exert some control over their lives. As terrible as that can feel, feeling responsible can also feel hopeful, for if they are to blame, then the problem is only "child-sized" and can, therefore, be more easily corrected.

[] FEAR is the most significant of the reactions of children and is related (in one way or another) to all other "defenses" and difficulties that your child is experiencing. The greatest fears are "separation anxiety and the "fear of abandonment." For instance, your child may still experience fear even when you tell him/her that you're only going to be gone for a little while, and that everything is OK. The fear still occurs because this kind of fear is not something that is rational or based upon present facts. It is based upon past experiences and future expectations of something dreadful and frightening happening. It's like a "sore spot" in your child that still needs to be healed. Though all children have fears, you may see new ones emerge at this time, especially in regards to being left alone, abandoned or separated from you. ALWAYS take any fear seriously and never joke about it unless you can both find it mutually amusing) and never use it to control your child. Ridiculing, ignoring or instilling fear is NEVER recommended even as a method of discipline. The psychological price to your child is a much higher cost than any temporary gains made. A child does not have to be frightened in order to learn caution, respect or appropriate behavior.

[] ARGUMENTS may occur more frequently as a method of keeping emotional distance; ("Who needs you anyway! I hate you! I don't care!") This is also

another "defense" used to protect oneself from unwanted feelings. Love may even be unwanted if it feels like a "trap" or way of getting hurt again. Your child may try to "distance you" through anger as a protection from getting hurt by getting too close. Don't take this personally. Your child needs you and your understanding of this emotional "pushing and pulling." Accept your child's need to "push you away," but NEVER say, "Fine, if that's what you want, then I'll just stay away" or "then you just stay away from me," etc. Your child is merely testing the strength of your relationship, not rejecting you.

[] COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR can occur, especially in older children who are given too much responsibility or are relied upon emotionally by parents. At first, the child may do everything possible to please, "be perfect," and behave "just right," or repeat a certain behavior over and over again in order to feel right (constant and repetitive cleaning, over-eating, following a rigid routine or being overly formal). Later, the child may try to escape this burden (of "being perfect" and "pleasing") by "growing up" too quickly (to get away) or by "acting out" -- stealing, promiscuity, violence, running away, ditching school, drugs, or other "older kid" activities.

[] SELFISHNESS is a common occurrence, or what appears to be selfishness. Everyone needs a strong and good sense of self. However, when a child becomes what we call "selfish" (overly self-centered), it only means that the child is feeling a strong need to protect him/herSELF due to feeling insecure. Not consciously realizing his/her insecurity, a child will attempt SELF-protection by thinking only of him/herSELF. Selfish people feel threatened by the outside world and do not have much to give, emotionally, so they become only interested in what they can get. (It's hard to think of feeding others when you are starving.) Also, young children need to develop a sense of self in order to become individuals and SELF-sufficient. Selfishness is a natural and necessary stage of development in children between the ages of two and four. After that time, look for the difference between feeling a sense of ownership and pride or being stingy and able to only think of oneself. Children may also be obsessed with questions and small details in seeking a sense of structure, stability and understanding. It's as though the child was trying to "fill him/herSELF up" with information, possessions and attention in order to feel SELF-protected and "full."

[] SPYING on the other parent is a very bad idea even though your child may volunteer to do so in order to try and please you and/or try and create a kind of

bond of continued emotional involvement between parents via a third party gossip (your child). This is a very bad idea. It places the child in the middle, gives hope of reconciliation due to this kind of involvement with the other parent, and creates loyalty conflicts which prove to be emotionally trying for a child.

[] OTHER behaviors that your child may exhibit in reaction to emotional stress are:

- specific panic/fear; generalized anxiety; nightmares.
- headaches; stomachaches; bowel disturbances; illnesses.
- over/under-eating; finicky eating.
- stealing ("taking" to get needs met; to express anger).
- lying (feeling "unsafe" to tell the truth; attempt to bolster self-esteem; need for attention).
- anti-social behavior; fire setting; cruelty to animals or children (all expressions of anger, fear, and deep emotional problems).
- lack of interest in appearance; moodiness; despair.
- feeling confused -- inconsolable
- never satisfied -- low self-esteem
- school phobia -- depression
- accident prone -- lack of friends

Remember, though you may not like some of the ways that your child is reacting, these are **symptoms** of emotional conflicts within your child and **not** merely attempts to manipulate or get you angry. Aside from your divorce, some of these problems will also occur simply due to your child's growing and maturing. If you and/or your child are in counseling, this list would be quite helpful to show the counselor. Use it for understanding and assisting your child, not to condemn or blame. The more checkmarks on this list, the more your child needs you.

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