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Children and Divorce

No. 1; Updated January 2017

One out of every two marriages today ends in divorce and many divorcing families include children. Parents who are getting a divorce are frequently worried about the effect the divorce will have on their children. During this difficult period, parents may be preoccupied with their own problems, but continue to be the most important people in their children's lives.

While parents may be devastated or relieved by the divorce, children are invariably frightened and confused by the threat to their security. Some parents feel so hurt or overwhelmed by the divorce that they may turn to the child for comfort or direction. This can add to the pressure and stress a child is experiencing. Divorce can be misinterpreted by children unless parents tell them what is happening, how they are involved and not involved, and what will happen to them.

Children often believe they have caused the conflict between their parents. Many children assume the responsibility for bringing their parents back together, causing them additional stress.

Vulnerability to both physical and mental illnesses can originate in the traumatic loss of one or both parents through divorce. With care and attention, however, a family's strengths can be mobilized during a divorce, and children can be helped to deal constructively with the resolution of parental conflict.

Talking to children about a divorce is difficult. The following tips can help both the child and parents with the challenge and stress of these conversations:

- Do not keep it a secret or wait until the last minute.
- Tell your child together with your spouse if possible.
- Keep things simple and straight-forward and don't share more information than your child is asking for.
- Tell them the divorce is not their fault.
- Admit that this will be sad and upsetting for everyone.
- Reassure your child that you both still love them and will always be their parents.
- Do not discuss each other's faults or problems with the child.

Parents should be alert to signs of distress in their child or children. Young children may react to divorce by becoming more aggressive and uncooperative or by withdrawing. Older children may feel deep sadness and loss. Their schoolwork may suffer and behavior problems are common. As teenagers and adults, children of divorce can have trouble with their own relationships and experience problems with self-esteem.

Children will do best if they know that their mother and father will still be their parents and remain involved with them even though the marriage is ending and the parents won't live together. Long custody disputes or

pressure on a child to "choose" sides can be particularly harmful for the youngster and can add to the damage of the divorce. Research shows that children do better when parents can minimize conflict and cooperate on behalf of the child.

In rare situations, a child may reject contact with one parent. This may happen for no apparent reason or with the encouragement of the other parent. This can be harmful and painful for the child and the rejected parent.

Parents' ongoing commitment to the child's well-being is vital. If a child shows signs of distress, the family doctor or pediatrician can refer the parents to a child and adolescent psychiatrist for evaluation and treatment. In addition, the child and adolescent psychiatrist can meet with the parents to help them learn how to make the strain of the divorce easier on the entire family. Psychotherapy for the children of a divorce, and the divorcing parents, can be helpful.

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