

Helping Children in Divorcing Families

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The Costs for Kids

Divorce profoundly affects children. Children of divorcing families experience fears of abandonment, anxiety, confusion, sadness, feelings of rejection, loneliness, divided loyalties, anger, and feelings of guilt. The most common symptoms that remain 18 months after a divorce include 1) manipulative behavior, 2) intense anger, and 3) depression.

The age at which parents divorce can greatly influence how much harm a child suffers. Those under 12 or 13 years of age, who do not get appropriate help in dealing with their emotions- like anxiety, anger, and grief- can bear the scars of their parents' divorce every day of their lives. The most critical period for children of divorce has been shown to be around puberty, between ages 10-14. Boys suffer more than girls, usually because it is the father who moves out.

Adapting to Life after Divorce

The first step in moving forward after a divorce is **healing resentment**. Parents should not fight their battles or communicate through their children.

The second is **co-parenting training**... every child has a right to go on seeing and loving BOTH parents (except in rare instances when the ex-spouse is dangerous). This does not mean that parents have to experience a complete reconciliation, only enough friendliness to remove their conflict from interfering with their child's development. Divorced parents should be able to establish healthy child-focused communication, see each other at birthday parties or special events for their child, call with concerns or updates, as well as make major decisions for their child together (i.e. phone privileges, purchase of a car, school decisions, etc.)

The third step is **helping children release themselves** from any responsibility for the divorce and from guilt. Children often think, "if only I had done something differently, my parents would be together." Children need to hear repeatedly, "this divorce is not your fault". Furthermore, a child should not be made to feel guilty because they desire a great, loving relationship with the other parent. Parents should never bad mouth their x-spouse in front of their children, nor should they try to withhold quality time from the other parent.

At RCA, we are passionate about helping parents and children in the midst of divorce to exchange personal hurt for healthy and healing outcomes. A great resource for blended families is [The Smart Step-Family: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family](#) written by Ron Deal.

(Hart, Archibald. Family Chaos: Redeeming Children of Divorce and Bad Marriages. *Christian Counseling Today*, 2004, Vol. 12, No.2)

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