

## Coping with Divorce

*From "An Allowance is Not a Bribe" by Allan M. Gonsler, LMHP, CMSW*

Divorce has become a very destructive element in children's lives. The impact of divorce on children is similar to when parents die. Loss is very difficult for children to understand. When parents divorce, children will be permanently scarred unless they confront the pain before they grow up. These scars will haunt children in the future whether they're trying to establish close relationships or are afraid to commit to intimate relationships.

In many cases, parents divorce emotionally a year and a half or two years before the actual physical separation. Parents become too involved with their own problems to notice how children are being affected. However, children have been responding all along, even if they've kept it hidden.

**When problems may develop.** After parents actually divorce, children might act out their feelings for a short time by developing school problems, experiencing extreme feelings of anger, or even becoming depressed. Some kids will seem unaffected, declaring that their family life is better now that mom and dad aren't fighting any more. For some kids the divorce is a relief, but a painful experience nevertheless.

Sometime during the two years after the divorce many children are ready to really discuss their parents' divorce. Now that your life is more stable, your children will feel it's safe to act out their feelings. Children might begin to wet the bed or regress in some other way, do poorly in school, become reclusive or angry.

Talk about what happened. Your children will want to talk to you about the divorce. You should be responsive to these needs even though they may have previously spent time discussing these issues. You should be prepared to honestly answer questions like, "Why did you marry Mommy or Daddy?", "Why did you get a divorce?", "How do you love someone and then stop?", "Whose fault was it?", "Is there a way I can get both of you back together?" These are painful questions for children to ask, and you need to learn how to give short, brief answers. You should never, ever criticize the other parent because it will come back to haunt you. If you find it difficult to talk to your children, you might want to consider using professional help.

**Peaceful visitations.** Set definite times for the non-custodial parent and children to get together so everyone knows what to expect. Visitation rights shouldn't be used by parents as a tool against each other. And children shouldn't be involved in fights that take place between parents. Children should know that you didn't get along with your spouse when you were married and are probably not going to get along when you're divorced. When visitations are well-defined and the parents are held accountable, the children will not get caught in the middle.

For some kids it's important to keep their parents fighting after the divorce. Children see their parents involved with each other and on some crazy level think everyone is still together as one big family.

No matter whether the divorce took place last month or last year, you need to recognize that divorce is a very painful, difficult event in your children's lives. Be sure to give your children the opportunity to resolve their feelings and help them adjust to their new lives.

Here's more you can do:

- Form a network of family and friends who can offer you emotional support and help when you need it.
- Single mothers should provide opportunities for their children, especially little boys, to interact with male role models.
- Maintain social contact with other adults and don't become overly preoccupied with your children's lives.
- Seek professional help for your children if, after a year, they are still experiencing problems adjusting to your divorce.
- Be aware of how your future relationships with the opposite sex will affect your children