

Tip Sheets

Divorce and its Impact on Infants and Toddlers



Divorce has implications on the social-emotional development of all children, especially on the very youngest members of a family.

Divorce means changes for the whole family that are very disruptive to a young child's

sense of well-being. Early childhood educators can help an infant or toddler better manage the change by understanding a child's feelings and behaviors and responding to their needs.

Behaviors We Might Expect to See When a Family Experiences Divorce

Very young children can't tell us what they are feeling, but they can show us with their behaviors.

We might expect to see very young children:

- Cry more often than usual
- Bite others
- Become upset at separation with primary caregiver or parent
- Be fussier eaters and nap with more irregularity
- Withdraw or show aggression
- Become clingy or get upset when the caregiver is out of sight or unreachable

What Can You Do in the Child Care Setting?

Children need to feel safe and secure in the midst of a major change like divorce and/or separation from an attached figure like mom or dad. You can do the following in the child care setting to support a child who is fearful and anxious because the family is changing:

- Keep a consistent routine that supports feelings of security.
- Keep the continuity of child care provider for the child. Have the same person greet the child in morning and say goodbye in the afternoon.
- Have the same teacher feed and diaper a child.
- Use intentional language with toddlers saying you will be here tomorrow when she returns.
- Avoid changes to the child care setting, including moving furniture around or taking toys away.
- Help an older toddler express their feelings and give younger children words for emotions.
- Validate feelings and let a child know he is safe in saying what he needs to you.
- Allow transitional objects to be easily accessed by the child throughout the day.

Infants

Babies are too young to understand what is happening with words so give them extra hugs and love to support their emotional well-being.

Understanding a Child's Emotions

- Infants as young as three can sense anxiousness or sadness in their primary caregivers.
- Infants and toddlers do not have the developmental ability to understand the loss of someone important to them.
- Children feel grief at the separation or absence of a parent.
- Young children feel a loss of safety and security when their world changes because someone they depend on is no longer available to them.

Toddlers

An older toddler needs help with his feelings of anxiousness and fearfulness. Give him simple words and phrases that he can use to tell you if he is sad or missed his mom or dad.

Parents and Other Adult Family Members

Recognize that parents and other adult family members will be feeling strong emotions and disruption at this time as well. If possible, respectfully and privately connect with each parent to let them know you are a partner in supporting their child during this time.

Be sensitive to the person's feelings and keep the focus on the child's needs by:

- Asking parents to let you know if they have any changing child care needs (for example, new routines for arrival or pick up, needing new days of care, etc.).
- Acknowledging that this is a difficult time for their family.
- Describing what you plan to do to support their child during this time. Parents may be unaware that very young children will still be affected by changes and emotions during this time. Sharing some of your ideas will help them think about ways they too can make this easier for their child, such as following routines, etc.

Additional Resources on Divorce and its Impact

Zero to Three

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2406-divorce-with-an-under-3-in-the-house-what-you-need-to-know>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services