



Supporting Children and Families in Times of Stress

by Barbara Gray

Paul, age three, wails and clings to his mother as he arrives in your classroom. You have noticed in the past few weeks he is crying more often than not at the beginning of the school day. You recall other recent behaviors that Paul has shown, such as pushing other children and occasionally complaining of a “tummy ache” during rest time. When you talk with his mother, she informs you that “Paul’s father has moved out of the house.” She opens up to you and tearfully reveals her fears about being a single parent to Paul and his 8 year-old sister. She is afraid her children will be “emotionally scarred forever” and admits to feeling “overwhelmed.” You appreciate the information about the family’s situation, but now you feel overwhelmed. How can you best help Paul and his mother during this stressful

time? How can you support the family without “taking sides”?

Teachers encounter situations like Paul’s frequently. Almost 50 percent of all children experience the divorce of their parents (Brady, 2000). Approximately 20 million children today are living in single-parent homes (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). These circumstances can lead to a number of issues that affect children. These issues include conflict and tension at home, custody disputes, decreased contact with a parent, feelings of abandonment, and financial concerns for the family (Brady, 2000).

Child development and divorce

A discussion of child development is helpful in examining parental separation and divorce because children’s behavior is best evaluated in terms of developmental stages. Development refers to that “unfolding” of a child’s physical growth, behavior, and personality (Deloian, 2000). One principle of development is that young children grow and develop at a rapid rate. In just a few short years, a child has moved from an infant totally dependent upon the caregiver to meet all needs into a busy, active, and social child who is striving to be independent.

The developing child is in a constant state of change. Along with the obvious physical changes are the changes in emotional development and the ability to think and communicate. These changes do not occur in a vacuum; the child develops within the context of family. It is within the family that the child’s basic needs are met, emotional bonds and relationships are formed, and learning begins (Cohen and Ronen, 1999). It stands to reason, then, that any event affecting the family will affect the child.

Effects of divorce on young children

Change—even normal, expected change—is stressful. Imagine the impact of a life-changing event, such as a separation or divorce between parents, on the life of a young child. If Daddy has moved out, for example, Mommy may feel more fearful alone at night and become obsessed with locking the door,

for example. Parents may argue, have crying jags, and become easily irritated.

These changes can lead to overwhelming stress and crisis for the child who does not yet have the necessary verbal and emotional skills to work through this situation (Cohen and Ronen, 1999).

There are two schools of thought on whether divorce is more difficult for younger children or older children. One view holds that young children lack the verbal and emotional skills that older children may have. As a result, the divorce may lead to long-lasting problem behaviors and delay in adjustment. Young children have trouble understanding complex feelings. The child hears, "We both love you very much," and then wonders, "Why are you leaving?" Children may become angry and confused, and they may cope by denying what is happening.

An opposing view is that young children are more flexible and can more easily accept changes in the family structure than older children. As a result, young children adapt and adjust in a relatively short time with few adverse effects. In addition, parents may try to hide conflict from younger children, so they are not as aware of the turmoil associated with separation and divorce as are older children (Cohen and Ronen; Wallerstein, 1991).

Regardless of how difficult divorce is for young children, there is no question that it brings stress and they will react to stress in a variety of ways. Changes between the ages of 2 and 6 years old often have changes in behavior. They may be irritable and aggressive, cry more often, and have trouble sleeping. They may also develop physical symptoms such as stomachaches, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Gender may also be a factor in the effects of divorce on children. Research has shown that boys from divorced families have more problems with aggression than do girls (Brady, 2000; Clark-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, and Booth, 2000; Cohen and Ronen, 1999; Frieman, 1993).

The good news is that with support and encouragement from caring people, children of divorced families are not doomed to a negative

outcome. In fact, research has shown that when divorce leads to a more stable, less conflicted environment, there is less risk for problems with development and adaptation (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley and Barenbaum, 1997). Children seem to be able to bounce back from periods of stress when the family receives support and appropriate interventions at the earliest opportunity (Houck, 2000).

Teachers cannot solve the problems arising from divorce in a child's home. But they are in a position to assist the child and the family in coping with stress and turmoil in this time of transition. Here are some suggestions (Miller, Ryan, and Morrison, 1999; Sammons and Lewis, 2000).

Provide security and support.

A child may feel abandoned during a parental separation or divorce. If there is turmoil in the home, the teacher may need to provide the steady base of support that will allow the child to function as usual. It is important for the teacher to respond compassionately when a child's behavior falls apart, offering words of understanding and concern. "This is a hard day for you. Let's try a different activity for now."

Help children feel competent and in control.

A child of divorcing parents is often in a state of limbo. Living arrangements and financial status may change. Because the child has no control over these changes, the result may be feelings of incompetence. Teachers can provide opportunities for control in the classroom by allowing the child to have input in classroom activities. "Alexia, will you pour more juice for Mandy?"

Maintain expectations and consistent discipline.

While it is often helpful for teachers to maintain some flexibility in the classroom, children need consistency. Children whose parents are divorcing need to know that expectations are still in place for appropriate behavior at school. Deal promptly

with any aggressive behavior, while helping the child learn ways to more appropriately show emotions and feelings. *“When you feel angry, Ben, don’t hit. That hurts. Tell Joey how you feel with your words.”*

Keep lines of communication open.

Children are able to recognize caring behaviors in adults. One important caring behavior is active listening. To listen actively, stop what you’re doing and get on an eye-to-eye level with the child. Observe body language and listen for the feelings behind the words. Acknowledge that you are listening by such responses as *“Um hum”* and *“I can understand why you feel that way.”* Show that you care in other ways. Offer opportunities for communication: *“Candace, would you like to sit in my lap and talk?”* Give encouragement: *“I can see that you really worked hard building that canal with the blocks.”*

Understand why children may have behavior problems.

Young children do not have the words to adequately describe all their mixed emotions when their families are in crisis. Consequently, they often act out with aggressive or babyish behaviors that are challenging for the teacher. Recognize that these behaviors are a normal response to family changes. Be patient with the child and work on developing positive behaviors.

Refer the child to a doctor or counselor, if necessary.

Some children may have significant behavioral problems and need further evaluation. Some behavioral problems can be caused by physical illness, so a trip to the pediatrician or pediatric nurse practitioner may be in order. A health assessment with appropriate laboratory tests can confirm or rule out physical health problems. If the child is not sick, the doctor can suggest a plan to manage the behavioral problems or refer the child for counseling.

Avoid taking sides. Maintain contact with both parents.

The teacher will likely have more contact with the custodial parent than the non-custodial parent. Even so, it is important to remain neutral and not be drawn into a tug-of-war between parents. A hurt or angry parent may want to tell you about the other’s faults. Avoid taking sides. Limit your discussions to how the separation or divorce affects the child’s behavior in the classroom. Although a child may live with one parent, both parents are significant in the life of a child. Make every effort to maintain contact with both parents, through phone calls, email, written notes, and individual conferences with each parent.

Provide information about resources.

Be ready to direct parents to resources that can help the family through this stressful time. Professional counseling and guidance is often helpful to families. Schools and mental health centers offer programs to help prevent or reduce divorce related problems. Additionally, many books are available to help young children and parents. (A few are listed on the following page.)

Separation or divorce is a family crisis. A child is often set off balance during times of stress and crisis, resulting in a variety of behavioral concerns. Teachers can help families understand that these behaviors are a normal reaction and offer support to help the child regain a sense of balance and control. The warmth, compassion, concern, and stability offered by the teacher can assist the child and family to emerge from this crisis as a healthy, functioning family.

Resources for children

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