

## Impact of Divorce on Teenagers by Dorie Rosenberg, LMFT

To understand the impact of divorce on teenagers, it is necessary to know what normal adolescent developmental goals are. In this article I will explain this, then offer suggestions on how parents can help their teens through their divorce. Lastly, I will address the question often asked of me: “Is it better for the children for parents to maintain an unhappy marriage or to get a divorce?”

Developmentally, teenagers are going through, being confused by, and adjusting to growing, puberty, and advanced abilities to think at higher levels (abstractly) They are developing their own identities (individuating). They are worrying about friendships, cliques, and the opposite sex. They are hearing the siren call of separation from you, urging them towards independence. They are constantly changing, so naturally their attention becomes more intensely focused upon themselves. They are in transition, and however much they demand to be left to their own devices, they also need the secure foundation of home and the consistency of parental authority and love in order to cope with their internal tumult. Parents need to be a solid wall for their teens to sometimes bounce themselves off of, or alternatively to lean against for support.

When parents separate, it interrupts this process of separation and individuation because their home base is shattered. They have to deal with many accompanying practical as well as emotional issues around the break-up of their parents and their home. They may feel ashamed of the situation, as it represents a failure (the “broken home”, “becoming another statistic”). They may feel as if this is an intrusion on their lives, and be very resentful towards their parents, acting angry and blaming them for wrecking their lives. It is excellent to offer them an outlet other than yourselves to verbally express these feelings. This gives you a bit of space to take care of your own needs, and gives your teen some necessary distance from your troubles. This can be a therapist who is familiar with issues of divorce, a caring relative or good family friend, and even their school counselor. They may be able to sublimate their feelings by losing themselves in school work, music, drama, sports, etc. If teens don’t have some distance from their parents’ divorce or the avenue to express themselves in a healthy manner, they may act out their reactions in destructive ways. These can include insomnia, psychosomatic illnesses (physical illness that is brought on or aggravated by a mental condition), continual worrying, forgetfulness, dropping grades, etc. On a more severe level, teens may express their unhappy feelings through drug/alcohol use, smoking, truancy and skipping school, eating disorders, addiction to the computer, stealing, etc. These are indirect and self-destructive ways of coping with feeling overwhelmed by chaos. They are simultaneously expressing their anger and trying to give themselves a sense of control over their lives.

If your teen is doing this, or not talking about how this situation is affecting them, you may need to say something, like, “I see you’re not saying much about us divorcing, but I know you have your own feelings and opinions. This is a very painful and difficult time for you, and I’m sorry it had to happen.” This is helpful for them, as it acknowledges their being affected by what is going on between their parents, and gives them a reality check that it is normal to feel whatever it is they are going through, in a situation that they neither caused nor desired.

There are other ways to alleviate your teen's anxiety and give them a sense of control. It is helpful to explain the facts of the divorce that will affect him or her, i.e., how long the process will take, what the custody arrangements are, any changes that will be occurring regarding where they will be attending school, or how much money will be available. They will want to know how much input they will have in determining some of these things. Pay attention to the daily details of life, and make an effort to maintain consistency in routines. Whenever changes occur that directly affect them, such as which parent will be picking them up from the school dance, or where they will be staying on specific days, let them know as soon as possible.

There are some adjustments that each teen needs to figure out for him or herself. Learning to change houses, pack and unpack, leave and get resettled and developing separate relationships with each of their parents are challenges that you can't handle for them. You might create some pleasant, low-key welcoming and departing rituals together to help ease the stress, but you can't protect them from the upheaval. Neither disparage nor defend your former spouse to your teen, for this compels them to take the opposite side, in order to even up their feelings about both of you in their minds. It prevents them from being aware of and processing their own feelings and opinions about both of you. Ultimately, they will need to develop special relationships with each of their parents, so don't try to influence them either positively or negatively.

Divorce is not necessarily a bad thing. Once the upheaval is over, and new schedules are established, children can learn many lessons. They learn to take more responsibility around the house, as well as for their dependent siblings. They may learn to be more considerate of and helpful to their parents, especially the custodial one(s). They learn to integrate taking care of others who need them with their burgeoning independence. They learn not to take a two-parent family for granted, with both positive and negative ramifications for their own future relationships. That is, they may work harder to maintain happiness in their future marriages, but they may also hesitate about getting married in the first place, fearing that they will get divorced, as well. There is a very worthwhile lesson in this: that marriage is not an end unto itself; that love includes two people who are continuously growing and changing, and who try to maintain that love by fully sharing their thoughts and feelings. Most studies reveal that children are less disturbed living in peace with one parent at a time than with two antagonistic ones. Whether one comes from a broken or an intact home does not necessarily predict whether a child will become delinquent or neurotic. In fact, children who are liberated from disturbed homes may be better adjusted than those whose homes are disturbed but not broken. By definition, divorce includes an open admission that parents did not get along and that they no longer live lovingly together. This honesty of feelings teaches children honesty in recognizing and expressing their own feelings. They can grow from this with an integrated sense of self, able to be both true to themselves and in their responses to others.

In summary, remember that when parents divorce, your teens are worrying and are more anxious, even if they do not express it directly to you. Don't heap extra responsibility on their shoulders, or lean on them for your emotional support. Let them be teens.

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She welcomes your comments.