Developmental Stages and Divorce

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While each child is a unique individual, there are patterns of behavior that tend to be seen at different ages and stages of development. Divorce is a major life event for adults, but even more so for children who have little power to alter either the divorce itself or the adult behavior. Because the adults are embroiled in their own feelings, the children often have little support.

Divorce is a long term event that kids adjust to throughout their lives. These adjustments parallel the unfolding stages of development that bridge the lifespan. Adults should not assume that developmental age is a strict boundary or that each child will step through stages in exactly the same way.

Age	*Developmental Task*	*Life Experience of Divorce*	*Signs of distress*	*Intervention*
Preverbal infants and toddlers	Skill development Trust Cause and effect	Disruption Stress Changes of routine	Fussy or crying Appetite or sleep changes Delays in developmental milestones	Routines, routines, routines Rock, speak softly, soothe Predictable stable base
Verbal -4 years	Ongoing skill development Gaining vocabulary Motor skills develop Beginning peer relationships	More conscious of tension and fighting Guilt that they caused the divorce Fear of abandonment	Regression to younger behaviors Sleeping, eating, pottying are disrupted Developmental delays may occur Fears may appear	Routines, routines, routines Set simple limits Allow "baby" behaviors and talk about "big kids" do more things Reassurance that they will be cared for Reassurance that they are loved Give simple explanations for the divorce. Reassure of the love of each parent.
4-6 years	World exploration and understanding Huge fantasy and imagination Language development and usage. Very concrete	Guilt becomes larger Fear of abandonment Wishes about the divorce Life changes can be terrifying	Fears of separations from parent Regression Disobedience Nightmares Strange fantasies Notices every little thing (Hypervigilance)	Routines, routines, routines Predictability Read kid divorce stories and talk Communicate with school and other caregivers Explain simply to the child—use words Encourage expression of feelings in art and play Reassure
6-10 years	Emergence of enduring friendships Can begin to understand another point of view Takes on values of society Skill integration	Grief and loss Anger toward less "present" parent Hope of reunification	Crying and sobbing Expression and manipulation to put parents together again. Taking care of parents Repetition of parental conflict May seem preoccupied Generalized anxiety Suicidal ideation	Protect from parental conflict Provide with simple understanding of divorce Routines, routines, routines Listen, nurture, play Reassure Team with the school Expectation and guidelines for behavior Accept and listen to feelings
Tweens 10-14	More understanding of various points of view Black and white thinking Testing for power and control Very social Sense of humor emerges!	See double standard in what parents say and what parents do Feel extremely powerless Try to take control Overwhelming sense of loss	Somatic complaints-headaches, stomachaches Saying mean and unkind things to parents Accusing parents Withholding time spent with a parent Not understanding the whole picture Problems with concentration Suicidal ideation	Set limits and boundaries Require respectful language Accept anger, and do much explaining of love of both parents Give simple controls when it works (fix your room at each house) Try to have both parents work together
Teens	Separation from family of origin as they develop their own personal identity Very egocentric Moralistic view of the world Peer group is primary Little impulse control Variation of decision-making abilities	Girls are angry Boys are sad Need for healthy role models for intimate relationship Grow up quickly to take on grown-up roles	Withdraw to get away from it Act out confusion in delinquency or other teen problems Worry about future relationships for themselves Angry at lack of control Risky behaviors Suicidal ideation	Listen to thoughts Help them to see that all possess positive and negative traits Continue to provide supervision Encourage questions and give honest answers while respecting adult privacy Be a good role model Stay connected

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Developmental Stages and Grief

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While response to grief is unique, the perception of the finality of death and the seriousness of fatal illness is, in part, influenced by developmental stages. At all stages, children need reassurance, time with a caring adult and the freedom to express their feelings.

Children who experience a death early in life will continue to re-experience grief as they move through developmental stages. They will mourn the loss again as their concept of death and dying develops.

Adults should not assume that developmental age is a strict boundary or that all children

Age	*Developmental Task*	*Concept of Death*	*Grief Response*	*Signs of Distress*	*Interventions*
Preverbal infants and toddlers	Skill development Trust Beginnings of cause and effect	Loss of caregiver Stress in the family		Fussy or crying Appetite or sleep changes Delays in developmental milestones	Consistent caregiver Routine, routine, routine Rock, speak softly, soothe
Verbal -4 years	Ongoing skill development Gaining vocabulary Motor skill development Beginning peer relationships	Do not understand permanence or universality	Intense but brief May repeatedly ask about the whereabouts of the deceased	Regression Appetite or sleep changes Developmental delays Fears may appear	Routine, routine, routine Brief, honest answers Do not use euphemisms such as gone to sleep or on a trip for describing death
4-6 years	World exploration and understanding Huge fantasy and imagination Language development and usage Very concrete	"Magical thinking" may lead to their belief that something they said or did caused the death resulting in feelings of guilt and responsibility. Fear of abandonment or separation	Spurts of distress and confusion Repetitive questioning	Appetite or sleep changes Nightmares Strange fantasies Hypervigilant Disobedience	Encourage expression of feelings through play or art Encourage physical activities Communicate and educate other adults who interact with the child Listen, listen, listen Reassure
6-10 years	Continue to think concretely but can begin to understand the point of view of others Take on values of society Skill integration	See death as final and universal. Interested in the biological processes of death, dying, burial and cremation	Problems with concentration leading to difficulty in school Acting out behaviors when they do not have words for their feelings Concern with their own health	Somatic complaints Crying and sobbing Generalized anxiety Suicidal ideation-a desire to join the deceased	Routine Listen Nurture Play Expectations and guidelines for their behavior Assistance in identifying feelings and adult acceptance of those feelings Team with the school
10-14 years	Beginning of abstract thought Black and white thinkers Testing for power and control Social Sense of humor	Begin to turn to peers for support Hide their grief Overwhelming feelings Resentful of not being included in details surrounding death	Refusal to talk about the death Fear of showing emotion	Feelings displayed as anger Somatic complaints	Accept their feelings but not the inappropriate behaviors Set limits and boundaries Encourage school performance but allow some flexibility
14-18 years	Abstract thinking matures Separation from family of origin Development of personal identity	Peer group is primary Little impulse control	Turn to peers for support Withdraw Death may be glamorized	Risky behaviors School problems Confusion may lead to delinquency Extreme anger	Modeling of healthy grieving Stay connected Listen without advice

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