

Divorce & Mental Health: Consequences in Children & Adolescents

Dr Neena Sawant

Professor Addl, Dept of Psychiatry

Seth GSMC & KEM Hospital, Mumbai

Prevalence of Divorce in India

Major life event

Half the marriages may end up in divorce

Separation
Broken families: Emotional Divorce

2nd ranked stressor - 50% adolescents
-depression and anxiety
HUNT study

Highest divorce rates in Gujarat, Assam, Maharashtra, West Bengal, J&K

- 11,667 divorce cases were filed in Mumbai in 2014, up from 5,245 cases in 2010.
- In Bengaluru, three more family courts were opened in 2013 to cater to the increasing demand.
- In Lucknow, 2,000 divorce cases were filed in 2014, out of which 900 were filed by couples married less than a year.

Factors leading to Divorce /Separation

Fights/ Poor communication



Incompatible



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During parental divorce children may experience stress from:

Change
Fear Of Abandonment
Loss of Attachment
Hostility between parents

Degree of parental conflict –
major stressor and risk
factor for child's adjustment

Parental
separation/divorce- long
drawn out process and
not just one event

Absent parent

A child may
grieve



Phases of Grief

First Phase

Shock

It helps us to survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We go numb.

Denial

Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. Anger is strength and it can be an anchor, giving temporary structure to the nothingness of loss. The anger is just another indication of the intensity of your love.

Anger

Second Phase

Anxiety

Loss of a loved one - depression is a normal and appropriate response.

Depression

If grief is a process of healing, then depression is one of the many necessary steps along the way.

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Before a loss, it seems like you will do anything if only your loved one would be spared.

Bargaining

Guilt -bargaining's companion. The "if onlys" cause us to find fault in ourselves and what we "think" we could have done differently

Guilt



Acceptance Phase

A natural process

Restoration of self-confidence

Acceptance is often confused with the notion of being “all right” or “OK” with what has happened. This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality.

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A photograph of a rocky shoreline on a foggy day. The foreground shows a calm body of water reflecting the overcast sky. The middle ground is filled with dark, wet rocks of various sizes. The background is a dense forest of trees, completely obscured by a thick layer of white fog. The overall mood is somber and quiet.

Age-Specific Reactions to Divorce

Infants.....and Toddlers



Every year 25
children under 1
year killed by the
parent- in Australia

Too young to understand
May sense the stress between parents and the
change in daily routine

2-5 years

Sad

Angry

Fearful

Sense of

abandonment

Disruption of

toilet training

Stuttering

Clinging

Feeding problems

Experience regression

Intensified anxiety

Sleep disturbances

Increased aggression





Abandonment, fantasies of reconciliation

5-8 years



**Clingy, scared
conflicts of loyalty**



**Guilty, sad, school
performance
affected**



**Angry, tantrums, peer relations
affected**

**Insecure, lonely, fearful,
helpless or may feel
responsible for divorce**

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Case vignette

8 year old school going girl

- c/o school refusal since 1 month
- Nightmares
- Asking for father
- Mother divorced when child was about 1 year old
- But questions about absent father never answered....





Anger

Loneliness

Shock



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AGES 9-12

FEELING

REJECTED



- ◆ Have ability to see two points of view
- ◆ Need to talk about their feelings and acknowledge anger
- ◆ May identify “good guy” / “bad guy”; what’s “right and fair”
- ◆ Puberty makes it difficult to be separated from same-sex parent

Vulnerable to physical /sexual abuse
 Risk of death

Surprise

Fear

Reject one parent



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12 year old boy

Staying with father after
divorce

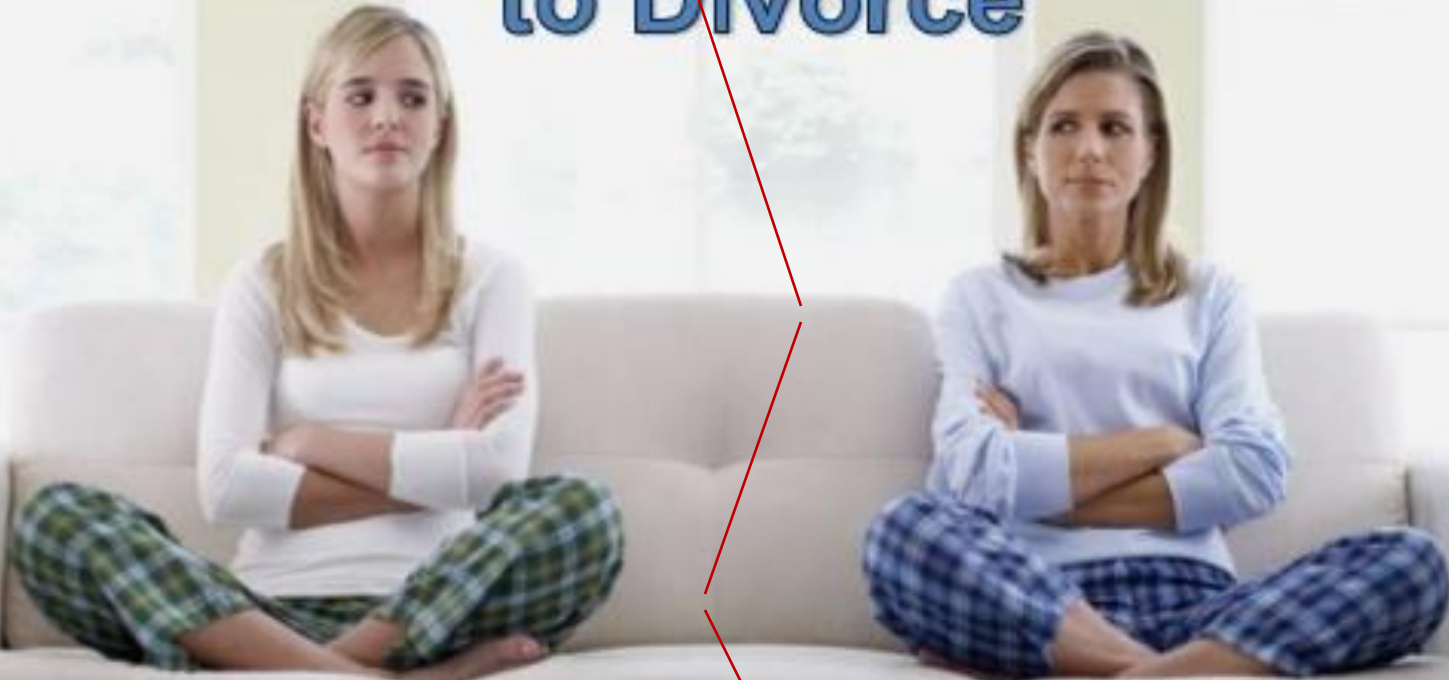
Mother had an affair... was not
given custody of child

Child very fearful of father ...

School refusal, refusal to eat

Depressive features

An Adolescent's Reaction to Divorce



- More developed socially and emotionally- peers are primary orientation
- Honest communication helps teens see both sides of issue

**IT'S ALL MY
PARENTS' FAULT**



Loss, Sadness,
Anger, and Pain

Problems in close
relationships, risk for
substance use and sexual
promiscuity, delinquency



Social
withdrawal and
separate from
the family



Acting-out
Behaviors
and Aggression

Case Vignette

**17 year old asks his mother
to take divorce
Seen father as
irresponsible.... Uncaring
“Not to stay in marriage for
society’s sake”**

Case Vignette

- 15 year old girl sought to stay with father after divorce
- Mother a case of depression
...attachment issues with child,
used to go and stay at
maternal place...child was
more attached to
grandparents than parents
- Mother was indifferent to take
custody of child

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Most reactions may be **normal** behavior

But

If they are affecting the child's life

Then treatment is needed

Supportive Counseling

- the promotion of close relationships between parents and children
- the enhancement of economic stability post separation
- minimizing parental conflict
- involving children in interventions

Pharmacotherapy

- SSRIs, low dose APD wherever required

Involvement of grandparents


- Resiliency – child’s ability to adapt after divorce /separation



Positive factors to enhance Resiliency



- Parental cooperation
- Parental mental health
- Stable financial conditions
- Supportive social and family network



Both parents should tell children about the divorce

Children should be told that the divorce is not their fault and parents love them



FAMILY

Tell children how life will change but minimize changes in as much as possible



Tell children both parents will continue to be a part of their lives



Inform school and teachers about changes in the family

- Children have a right to express their views in divorce proceedings and should have an opportunity to be heard in processes that affect them.
- Child-focused interventions -“follow processes and reach conclusions that are in each child’s interests.
- Judicial conferencing gives the child a voice in decision-making which not only empowers the child but also leads to more informed decisions that are more likely to be in the child’s best interests .

