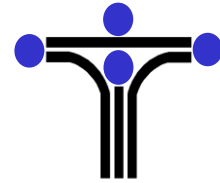




Divorce and Separation Centre



Family Mediators Association

Children, Separation and Stress

In the stress of divorce and separation, it is easy to get so caught up in your own problems and unhappiness that you cannot pay attention to the needs of your children. But divorce and separation are stressful for children too. Mum and Dad arguing, living together in silence, crying - these are all situations children may have to face in coping with their parents splitting up.

Stress happens - to adults or children - when a situation feels like more than you can deal with. Some level of stress can make people seem full of energy. This isn't really the case; it is our bodies calling up adrenaline, which prepares us for 'fight or flight' in a difficult situation. Stress is not bad in short bursts. But living in a stressful situation for a long time is very wearing for everybody - including children.

How can you tell if your child is suffering from stress?

Here are some signs to look out for.

Being 'naughty'

Acting out is a comparatively easy way for children to stop their distress over the situation. They make someone angry at them. It gets your attention and can conceal their misery.

Being helpful

Children can forget their own misery by helping others. They lose the carefree aspects of childhood. To begin with, this may not look like a symptom of distress because they are being so 'good' and, unlike acting out, are not causing any problems!

Denial

This is when a child simply refuses to acknowledge the stressful situation. This alleviates pain because the cause of the pain simply ceases to exist. Fantasy can replace reality, including magical beliefs for protecting themselves and loved one. Sometimes, children create imaginary friends for company and comfort.

Humour

The 'class clown', who uses constant joke telling or practical joke playing. This can lead to a child not being able to cry when it would be appropriate thing to do - a pattern of behaviour that can last when the child is grown up.

Acting 'babyish' (Regression)

Some children act younger than their years. They become more dependant and demanding than usual in an attempt to get more comfort and affection to reduce their distress.

Sublimation

This is when a child becomes absorbed in hobbies, sports, computer games, television, etc, as a way of compensating for their needs not being met by their parents. It can lead to them ignoring their own needs in later life.

Suppression

This is a temporary setting aside of their distress. Your child might cry when told of your impending separation and then go off and play as if nothing is wrong. They may then return to crying. It is a way of gathering strength to deal with a difficult situation. However, it can lead to denial (see above).

Withdrawing

Children can become so quiet that they become almost invisible. This can involve taking themselves off physically. Or it can be a mental retreat, where concentration is focused on pets, the computer or the TV, or into excessive daydreaming. Either way, it offers relief from the tension around them.

You may recognise some of these as coping mechanisms that you use yourself. They may in fact have developed during your own childhood.

How can you help?

You can reduce your child's stress levels by removing at least one element which is causing stress. Being aware of how disputes with the other parent create stress is an obvious example. But it can be as simple as making sure you have a hot meal cooked for your child instead of leaving him or her to find snacks.

Increase the number of coping mechanisms that your child uses. For example, if they are currently just withdrawing, teach them how to anticipate positively. Broaden their range of coping skills.

Show your child new ways of dealing with the situation. Look for established coping skills and show how he or she can apply them to other situations. Talk to them about how they dealt with another situation and discuss how they can use those skills in the current circumstances.

Try to appreciate that your child's point of view might be very different from your view of the situation. Provide as much information as possible that is appropriate for their age. But avoid burdening the child with your feelings of distress or using the child as a source of comfort for yourself. You as the parent need to stay in the role of the parent and keep taking care of your child. Above all, ask for information. Services for supporting children during family breakdown remain thin on the ground. But we will be able to suggest to you places where your child can get support.

(With thanks to Susan Jane Smith)
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