

young families

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Separation and Divorce

Changing ways of living have brought about a large increase in the number of one-parent families. It has been estimated that each year since 1972, approximately one million children experience the shock of the separation or divorce of their parents. Today, two out of five pre-school children are not being raised by both biological parents.

There have been only limited studies done on the effects a separation or divorce have on a child. However, there are certain typical ways children in different age groups react.

A separation or divorce is best seen as a process, rather than a single event. The main event in this process is the actual physical separation of the parents.

Emotional reactions to a separation, of course, differ with the individual characteristics of each child, including their age and sex. Generally speaking, however, these reactions include guilt, sorrow, anxiety, anger, and a sense of their own defenselessness.

Young children, for example, may regress to infantile actions that include the need for thumbsucking and a security blanket.

Older children openly show grief and a sense of rejection. They feel anger at the parent they believe to be at fault. They may react with behavioral problems at home and school. Teenagers may worry about their ability to have a successful marriage.

The following suggestions for dealing with separation are offered by Dr. Judith Wallenstein.

- Children need to understand what the divorce or separation means, what the family structure will be like, and what changes they can expect in their living arrangements and daily routines.
- Children need to understand that they will be cared for now and in the future.
- Children need to believe that the parent-child relationship will endure with each parent, and that they will not be abandoned by either.
- Children need to understand the reasons for the separation or divorce.
- Children need to understand that they did not cause the separation or divorce, and they cannot mend the relationship.
- Children need the assurance that they are not expected to take sides for or against either parent.

(Prepared by the Child Health Clinic Program of the Minneapolis Health Department.)

Gentle Strokes for Little Folk

What is "stroking?" When we think of stroking, usually we think of touching, like petting a cat.

Stroking is touching. When you "stroke" or touch someone, you are giving them attention and letting them know that you value them, that you know they are there, and that they are worth your time and attention.

Stroking begins when we are born. Infants have a need to be caressed, handled, stroked, and loved. It was discovered several years ago that some youngsters in orphanages were fed, clothed, changed, but apparently did not receive enough stroking—that is, loving and physical contact, so they withered and died.

We never outgrow our need to be physically stroked or touched. However, as children grow, verbal strokes may take the place of some of the physical contact. Verbal strokes include "I love you," "I really appreciate your help with the dishes," "You decide what is best for you," "Sally, that is a very nice sweater that you made and I am sure you are proud of it," "I am so pleased that you are my son." These comments of attention, respect, praise, warmth, love, and compliment are called positive strokes.

If we make it a point to give positive strokes right after your child has done something you like or appreciate, your child is more likely to try to repeat the behavior that earned him or her the stroke. For example, if we praise, encourage, or kiss a child after he or she has made the bed or helped a younger sibling, chances are the child will make the bed again or help with younger brothers or sisters again. Since everything we say can be taken as a positive or negative stroke, remember—"what you stroke is what you get."

Be Consistent

Are you consistent parents? Or are you strict one day and permissive the next? Did you know that inconsistency can be a major source of emotional disorders and family disruption?

Children whose parents (either or both) are inconsistent can become tense and unhappy and may embark on a program of disobedience to see how much they can get away with. Children (and adults) need limits. They need to know what they are and that they will be maintained consistently. Sometimes parents feel guilty for having punished or chastised a child, so when the offense is repeated they back down. This confuses the child. Children will test the limits established—in some cases several times—but if the response is always the same, they have the security of knowing what will happen when a particular type of behavior is tried.

Check yourself—are you consistent with your children?

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Parents' Responsibilities to Babysitters

What is your responsibility as a parent to a babysitter? Always write down where you can be reached, as well as your doctor's name and phone number. Give precise, written instructions if your child needs medication. Indicate snacks your child and the sitter may have. Return on time or call if you'll be late. If your babysitter is a teenager, respect the curfew time set by his or her parents and see that your sitter has transportation home, especially after dark.

Take Children to the Library

For an inexpensive, worthwhile activity for preschoolers, take them to your library to show them the kind of children's books that can be read there or checked out. Teach them to handle books carefully. Some libraries provide a children's story hour, when an adult reads or tells stories to preschoolers. This exposes children to good literature and gives them an opportunity to be with children of their own age. Children who are taken to the library regularly learn early to enjoy reading for entertainment, as well as for learning; that is essential to their later success in school.

Instant Cocoa Mix

Here's an inexpensive form of a nutritious snack drink:

Sift together and mix well:

- 7 cups nonfat dry milk
- 1 cup sugar
- 3/4 cups cocoa
- 1/4 teaspoon salt



For 1 cup of cocoa, put 1/3 cup of the above mix in a cup. Stir in a little warm water to make a paste. Fill the cup with boiling water, stirring all of the time.

Children under 9 years of age need 2 or 3 servings of milk daily; adults need 2 servings. A cup of cocoa counts as one cup of milk.

Recipes for Children's Art

The following are easy, inexpensive art materials for children's creative play.

Play Dough

- 1 cup salt
- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup water, with a few drops of food coloring

Mix dry ingredients. Add water and mix with hands. Store in a plastic bag in refrigerator. Keeps for months.

Finger Paint

- 1/3 cup gloss laundry starch
- 2 cups boiling water
- 1/2 cup soap flakes

Dissolve starch in small amount of cold water in a pan. Add boiling water and cook until clear. Add soap flakes and stir until dissolved. Talcum powder (1/4 cup) may be added for aroma and a preservative, but this is optional. When cool, pour into small jars with tight lids. For color add powdered poster paints or food coloring.

To fingerpaint use the glazed side of wide shelf paper; cut into pieces at least 12 by 18 inches. This size allows free arm movement. Wet the paper generously with a sponge; use a wooden spoon handle or tongue depressor to flatten and get rid of excess water. Tack down edges to dry smoothly.

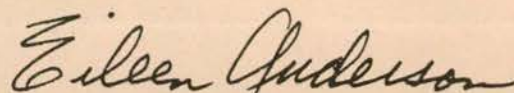


Soap Paint

Make a thick paste of real soap flakes or beads and water (not detergent). Paint with it like finger painting on colored paper.

In This Issue

This newsletter is published for young families in the Twin Cities area by the Agricultural Extension Service of your University of Minnesota. I would appreciate your suggestions for its content. Call me at 872-9441.



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