

Young Children and Divorce: Helping Your Child Cope With Change

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When something significant happens in a family system, such as a divorce, the entire family is affected. An adult's experience with change in a family system usually is determined by how much control he or she has over the situation.

Children have no control, however. When faced with a significant change in their family, they are prone to experience emotions such as insecurity, anxiety, and depression. It is essential that parents of young children continuously reassure their children that they will always be a part of the family, that family is defined by people that love one another no matter where they live, and that mom and dad will continue to love them.

A young child will show a range of emotional responses to the divorce. A child's anger can be expressed as rage (for example, biting, kicking, or causing disruption in a classroom), withdrawal (for example, isolating himself or herself from peers or family members), or depression (for example, showing little or no interest in favorite toys or activities).



The expression of emotion may be problematic, but the emotion itself can be viewed as healthy. Anger allows children to deal with high levels of stress or frustration, alerts the body to danger, and inspires the body to take healthy action.

What Can Parents Do? Young children will need help finding healthy ways to express their anger. Parents can provide direction by:

- Empathizing with the child, which validates his or her feelings and will help initiate further discussion.
- Teaching the child to express anger through words, creating simple "I" statements, such as "I feel angry when...."
- Helping identify healthy outlets for the child to express himself or herself. Young children are excessively creative and have the ability to express themselves through play and art, so facilitating those types of activities at home or finding outlets for creative expression outside the home can be helpful.
- Helping connect their children with peers whose families also are experiencing divorce. These interactions can help children realize that their experiences and emotions are normal.

Even though divorce is considered to be a problem primarily between adults, it does have a profound effect on the children who are touched by these experiences. When a painful loss or change occurs in a family unit, not only do adults grieve, but young children do also. Because of their age, their developmental stage, and their limited number of life experiences, children may find it extremely difficult to verbalize their feelings of grief.

Youth and Family Counseling is offering a **Bridges** group running from January 17 to April 11, 2017. The **Bridges** program provides an opportunity for young children to share their experiences and feelings confidentially within a group of peers. The program's focus is to help children put their feelings into words, work through their grief, build a stronger sense of self-esteem, and begin to accept the change that has occurred in their family.

If you have any questions regarding the **Bridges** program or how to process divorce with your young child, please contact our Client Coordinator Catherine Van Damme at 847-367-5991 ext. 13.