

THE EFFECTS OF MARITAL DISCORD AND DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

Frances P. Glascoe, Ph.D.
Professor of Pediatrics
Vanderbilt University
www.forepath.org

A child's sense of well-being relates to her parents' well-being. The single best predictor of children's behavioral and emotional difficulties is parental discord. Therefore, parents should:

Minimize your children's exposure to parental conflict

Conduct business related to separation and divorce apart from your children

Attempt to regain composure quickly, seek divorce counseling, family or individual therapy

Maintain existing household rules and structure to enhance your children's sense of security and continuity

Give your children time to relearn rules when they return from visiting the other parent

Seek an amiable settlement, being respectful and mindful of the needs of the custodial and non-custodial parents to get along with each other

Avoid talking negatively about the other parent to your children

Avoid bribing children, involving children in visitation planning, or using children as a bargaining chip for concessions

Abide by the terms of the agreement, seeking legal counsel when changes are needed

Talk with children calmly and briefly about the reasons for the divorce

Tell the children they are not the reason or cause for the divorce

Take these steps to build your children's self-esteem

- Show interest in your child and her activities
- Act in a loving manner
- Express enjoyment in parenting
- Accept your child's strengths and weaknesses
- Treat your child respectfully

Observe your child for signs of difficulties. Many children have great difficulty adjusting to divorce and need short-term counseling to understand that they are not responsible. Signs include increased acting out, taking too much responsibility for household chores and siblings, excessive crying, withdrawal, anger, or sadness.