

YOUNG CHILDREN OFTEN MISINFORMED ABOUT DIVORCE

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.
Psychologist

Children of divorcing families often have frightening and confusing misinformation, according to a report in the December (1999) Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Experts say age-appropriate explanations are important for a positive adjustment to divorce.

Researchers conducted semistructured play interviews with children up to 6 years of age from 21 divorcing families in varying degrees of conflict. Conflict was based on amount of use of the family services system and legal system activity. Participating families resided in 10 different communities, both rural and urban, had at least one child younger than six, and were diverse socioeconomically. These families also had both parents willing to participate in the study.

In general, children from high-conflict families displayed more anxiety while playing with human figures representing lawyers, judges, police, and health care personnel. High-conflict children also articulated more negative changes in their fathers, although every child described some change, whether good or bad. Particularly troublesome for the children were changes in fathers' expressions of affection.

Other common themes were blame, loss, sadness, fear, and abandonment. There was also widespread confusion about the definition of divorce. Additionally, the children's perceptions of lawyers and judges were generally negative, and virtually all of them suggested ways to improve the divorce process. Researchers say the findings and confusions noted in the study are consistent with normal stages of child development.

These children's concerns seem to be rooted in their developmental agendas. Their sense of safety and security is based on the parental relationship and adherence to routines, and this foundation is often turned upside-down during divorce. But researchers found that what parents say can help. Just as parents give different amounts of information to help kids cope with doctors' visits or sick relatives, parents should provide age-appropriate information about divorce. The children in the sample had too much information that was not helpful and not enough that was. These children knew about motions and legal fees, but not about the professionals assigned to listen and lend support. This is something that many mental health professionals agree with.

The right information at the right time can certainly help children dealing with loss. This is particularly true during the holidays. Professionals will agree that the first holiday after a divorce or separation can be really tough for kids. Parents should let them know that it's OK to feel lousy for a while and that it will get better.