

This article was first published in [Divorce Magazine](#) and is reprinted here with their full permission.

Parenting Pitfalls

Since your children's adjustment is directly linked to yours, you must learn how to handle the stresses brought about by your divorce. Here are some of the most common warning signs that you need help before your children become casualties of your divorce.

By Elissa P. Benedek, M.D. and Catherine F. Brown, M.Ed.

The process of separation and divorce sets up an almost impossible situation for parents. At the same time that they need time out for themselves -- to deal with the emotions and stress accompanying the loss of their marriage and to decide a new course of action -- their children have the greatest need for reliability and assurances of love. Absorbed in their own problems, parents may become less affectionate with their children or fail to discipline them consistently. The more parents pull back to regroup after a divorce, however, the more fiercely children show their need for attention. When both parents and children have lost their emotional equilibrium, they exacerbate each other's problems.

The keys to breaking this cycle are for parents to:

- take control of their lives
- create a nurturing, predictable environment for the children
- learn to deal with the children authoritatively
- be aware of some of the problems that divorced parents commonly encounter (as described later in this article).

Common Problems

When a husband and wife first separate and divorce, they experience the gamut of emotions from sadness, anxiety, guilt, shame, and shock to elation over believing that all their problems are now solved. The spouse who didn't want the divorce may feel worthless and unlovable; the spouse who wanted the divorce may have second thoughts. There is no one order for these emotions; each may come and go again and again.

It's vitally important that parents overcome these reactions and, for the children's well-being, learn how to handle the stresses brought about by the divorce. The children's adjustment is directly linked to the parents' adjustment.

Adult Regression

Children sometimes behave in ways typical of an earlier stage in their development in reaction to their parents' separation and divorce. In the same way, a keenly unwanted or brutal divorce has the potential for throwing an adult back into an earlier stage of development or leading to behavior that is unusual for that person. Some adults may go so far as to become helpless, depending on others -- including their children -- to take care of them.

Eve, for example, became extremely upset when her husband of ten years suddenly left her. Although she had run the household smoothly and taken good care of their son during the marriage, after her husband moved out, she began to have difficulty making even routine decisions. When the roof leaked or the stove malfunctioned, she called her former husband to help. After she had overdrawn her checking account a few months in a row, she asked him to take over paying the bills. Since he still felt guilty about his sudden departure, he went along with her requests. He soon found, however, that the more assistance he gave her, the more dependent she became on him. Within a few more months her childish behavior made him fear for his son's safety and well-being. She finally sought therapy after he began threatening to sue her for custody of their son.

Most people don't need to see a mental-health professional to recover from regressive behavior; usually, such changes are temporary, remitting when the person is able to reestablish a sense of inner equilibrium and direction.

Role Reversal

After a divorce, some parents experience a specific type of regression in which they become too dependent on one or more of their children. In essence, a role reversal takes place in which the children become the parents' caretakers, confidants, and counselors. These parents are most often troubled, depressed, and lonely; they are unwilling or unable to take responsibility for themselves. Sometimes, they are alcoholics or drug-addicted. The result is a form of mental bondage and skewed development in the child and a faulty sense of reality in the adult. In its most destructive (but thankfully rare) variant, some adults go so far as to commit incest, using the child as a replacement for the lost marital partner. More commonly, they have the child sleep with them to alleviate their loneliness.

Most parents, however, tend to depend too much on their children in more subtle ways. Nancy, for example, was divorced after 15 years of marriage. Because of her extreme shyness, she had never made many friends. When she was married, taking care of her family had filled her time, giving her a ready excuse to refrain from cultivating new friendships. Now, for companionship, all she had left was her 10-year-old daughter, Alexa. The two of them were inseparable. On weekends when Alexa wasn't with her father, Nancy and her daughter spent much of their time at the mall, movies, or taking short trips.

Within a year of the divorce, Nancy began to interfere with Alexa's visits with her father. When he would call to arrange a pickup time for Alexa, Nancy would tell him that their daughter was busy, or that she didn't want to go with him that weekend because she had already made plans. When the visits stopped altogether, the father consulted a lawyer for enforcement of his visitation rights. I saw Nancy and Alexa as an impartial examiner requested by the court.

The extent of Nancy's problem became clear as I interviewed the family members. Alexa said that after her father had first moved out of their home, her mother's only apparent interest outside her job was the television set. Except for a few of Alexa's friends, no one ever came to visit them, and she and her mother, in turn, visited no one -- not even relatives. Alexa worried about her mother spending too much time alone and took it on herself to liven up her mother's life. She eventually became afraid to leave her mother alone. As Alexa took greater and greater responsibility for her mother's welfare, she was increasingly locked out of the normal growing-up experiences of a preadolescent. Her father was right to be concerned. I recommended that Nancy and Alexa enter family therapy to straighten out their roles as parent and child. Nancy also needed individual treatment to address other problems.

The temptation to become too dependent on your children is always there if you don't have another adult to whom you can turn when you need advice or just someone to talk to. Although there's nothing wrong with soliciting your children's opinions in matters that concern them (in fact, doing so helps build their sense of responsibility and family commitment), avoid relying on them for advice that affects only you or that should be offered only by adults. For example, it's all right to ask your children to help pick out the family's new car, but you should not ask them whether you should date someone you just met at work.

Overburdened vs. Idle

For many harried, overworked single parents, it's sometimes all too easy to fall into a routine in which they depend on an older child to care for younger siblings, or assign chores that require an unrealistic degree of responsibility.

Although it's not unreasonable for single parents to expect their children to carry some of the weight of household duties, such responsibilities should be assigned with certain limits:

1. The chores should be appropriate to the child's age (see "Assigning Appropriate Chores" at the end of this article).
2. Generally, children under the age of 10 should not be left unsupervised.
3. Older children should not be given total responsibility for the care of younger brothers and sisters. They are siblings -- not substitute parents.

4. Chores should not interfere with schoolwork or sleep, or preclude time with friends. Schoolwork is a child's most important job, and an active social life is a necessary ingredient of healthy development.

Instead of overburdening their children, some parents go too far towards the other end of the responsibility scale. To assuage their guilt over the divorce, these parents exclude the children from household tasks and try to do everything themselves. Or they may use such faulty reasoning as "I had to do too many chores when I was a kid. I don't want to put my kid through that." Such selfless intentions are unrealistic from the parent's point of view and do a disservice to the child. Being assigned and expected to carry out age-appropriate tasks creates a sense of accomplishment and self-discipline in children. It's a training ground for handling increasingly more difficult demands that will be placed on them by school, other institutions to which they belong, and eventually, paying jobs.

Studies have shown that children with divorced parents reap unanticipated benefits from assuming great deal of responsibility at a young age. Many of these children report that they have a greater sense of strength, independence, and capability as a result of their experiences in a post-divorce family. They are clearly proud of themselves and of their ability to assist their parents at a time when the family's future was seriously jeopardized. Children whose parents are divorced -- like all children -- need to feel needed; thus, parents should not try to protect their children from the vagaries of everyday life. The danger comes when the children are robbed of their childhoods, forced to grow up far before they're ready. They can never recapture those years.

Isolation vs. Activity

In the immediate aftermath of divorce, many people follow one of two patterns: they either isolate themselves from others or pursue an overly-hectic social life.

People who choose isolation may do so for many reasons: they may not be able to afford a babysitter, or they may feel guilty about leaving their children with a sitter after being away from them at work all day. Although their motivations are different, both types of parents may come to resent their children.

Some parents, however, use their work and/or their children as a handy excuse for avoiding interaction with others. They may still be sad and upset about the divorce -- unable to put it behind them and take the first few shaky steps to reestablish their lives. They show no interest in dating, and may deny having sexual feelings.

Some people, overwhelmed by depression, may feel unable to make the effort to meet new people or take on new challenges. Such behavior often fosters over-dependence on the children, since they become the parent's only focus in life. What will become of such a parent when the children break away and establish their own lives? In its worst form, isolation may lead to severe depression and other psychological problems. At the other end of the social spectrum are those parents who are any place but home. With a full schedule of night classes, church activities, outings with friends or dates, these parents leave their children with a round of babysitters and relatives (including the children's other parent). Some may go so far as to replace the former spouse with a serious new love interest before they are emotionally ready, or they frenetically engage in indiscriminate dating and sexual relationships. Sometimes, such parents are (subconsciously or not) trying to blot out the fact that they even have children, who are reminders of their failed marriage or a responsibility they wish they didn't have.

Obviously, the children suffer greatly by missing out on the consistent parenting and love they need, particularly in the first few months after their parents' divorce. Children's distress is compounded by the antics of an out-of-control parent and, not surprisingly, they often come to mirror that behavior back to the parent.

Moving On

In the first months to a year after separation and divorce, your life can be in a state of upheaval. When the dust finally begins to settle, however, there is the business of building a new life.

Your first task in this reconstruction is to put your failed marriage behind you and deal with any residual feelings of grief, anger, or guilt. In addition, you need to realize that your role as spouse is separate from your role as parent. Although your marriage has ended, your parenting relationship goes on.

That the children come to terms with the divorce has important consequences -- not just in the period following the divorce but in their adult years as well. Children with divorced parents sometimes rush into relationships for which they are ill-prepared in an effort to prove they are lovable and to fight their fear of rejection. If they see that you can recover from such a devastating trauma, such reactions in their adult lives may be avoided.

Attaining an inner peace about your divorce partly depends on the quality of the relationship you and your ex-spouse are able to build as co-parents. If seeing or thinking about your ex-spouse is emotionally charged for you, you may need to monitor your attitudes and behavior towards your ex in front of your children. Remember, although the two of you were unable to continue your marital relationship, this has nothing to do with the right or ability of each of you to be a good parent to your children.

Are you too dependent on your kids?

Any one of these signs may indicate that parents are depending too much on their children:

- Relying on the oldest child to provide most of the care for the younger siblings
- Relying on the children to cook meals, take over the bulk of household chores etc. to the point that these jobs interfere with the children's schoolwork and social activities
- Describing financial troubles in detail
- Asking for their children's permission to go on dates
- Giving details of their dates (including sexual activity)
- Sharing intimate details about their marriage and divorce
- Trying to alleviate their loneliness by keeping their children home from school
- Trying to talk their children out of visiting with their other parent
- Constantly complaining to their children about "how hard life is."

Assigning Appropriate Chores

Here's a rough hierarchy of chores and responsibilities for children according to age. It's not meant to be all-inclusive, but to give you an idea of children's general capabilities and how they can be built on as the children grow older.

1 to 2 Years:

- Begin to control themselves so that they don't deliberately make messes or break things

2 to 3 Years:

- Pick up after themselves, such as returning toys to toy chest
- Bring used silverware (forks and spoons) to sink
- Put trash in wastebaskets

3 to 4 Years:

- Help set table
- Empty wastebaskets
- Put away toys with little direction from parent
- Put dirty clothes in hamper
- Help care for family pet

4 to 5 Years:

- Make bed with help from other parent
- Hang coat up on low rack
- Set table
- Brush teeth, comb hair, and dress with little or no help from parent
- Put dirty dishes on counter after meal
- Help with simple yard-work: pile leaves in the fall, pick up sticks, help plant seeds, water outside plants

5 to 6 Years:

- Make bed (but not perfectly)
- Take bath and wash hair with little or no help from parent
- Answer the phone properly (but not take messages)
- Write simple thank-you notes
- Clean up bedroom
- Assume more responsibility in caring for family pet
- Water houseplants
- Help fold and put away clean laundry
- Put away silverware from dishwasher
- Help wash family car

6 to 8 Years:

- Wake up to alarm clock
- Pack simple school lunch (e.g., sandwich and cookies)
- Prepare simple snacks
- Straighten up kitchen and bathroom after use
- Take accurate phone messages
- Rinse dirty dishes
- Sweep out garages and sidewalks

8 to 12 Years:

- Put out garbage for pickup
- Clean bathroom floor, sink, toilet
- Clean kitchen floor, counters
- Wash and dry dishes
- Wash family car
- Vacuum and dust
- Assume bulk of family pet care
- Bag lawn clippings
- Load, run, and empty dishwasher
- Deliver newspapers

12 Years:

- Do minimal babysitting of siblings and nearby neighborhood children
- Run washer and dryer
- Iron clothes
- Prepare simple meals

This article has been edited and excerpted from *How to Help Your Child Overcome Your Divorce* by Elissa P. Benedek, M.D. and Catherine F. Brown, M.Ed. (Newmarket Press, 1999). Reprinted by permission from Newmarket Press (18 East 48th St., New York, NY 10017). A leading child psychiatrist and forensic expert, Dr. Benedek offers information, advice, and answers to help divorcing parents alleviate their children's suffering. Drawn from more than 20 years of experience, this book will help you avoid many of the common parenting pitfalls after divorce. Available at better bookstores across North America -- such as www.amazon.com or www.indigo.ca -- or from the publisher, [Newmarket Press](http://www.newmarketpress.com).