

Why Your Divorce is a Disaster for Your Child

P. Donohue Shortridge

If you are reading this, it is probably because you are getting a divorce.

(But read on even if you are not getting a divorce. This is for you if you have children, are thinking about getting married and having children now or someday, or know someone who is.)

Divorce is painful for everyone, but it goes beyond pain for your child; it alters his personality. As his parents, you are responsible for how your actions are downgrading the quality of your child's life.

Divorce robs your child of safety, security and visibility.

Let me be clear, there is no good answer for your child in your divorce. He will not be OK, he will be damaged and it is important that you understand why and how.

The fundamental requirements for your child to thrive are to feel safe, secure and to be seen.

- Safety, from your child's point of view means

I know what will happen tomorrow and it will be the same as today. I will be protected by the people who have always protected me, my mom and dad. I will live in the same house and be with the same people every day.

- Security, from your child's point of view means

I can trust that all is well in my world, I don't have to take on adult worries. I can tend to my task, which is to grow up.

- Being seen from your child's point of view means

I will be seen as a person, worthy of respect and there will be time for me in the normal course of the day. I am known for where I am in my development.

Divorce robs your child of safety, security and visibility in the following ways:

Divorce robs your child of safety because the people whom he loves have chosen to rock his world. He loses his parents as he knew them and often loses his home as well, having to travel between his parents' houses. Even the language changes; it's now "mom's house" or "dad's house". Your child is screaming out to you, "Where is my house?" To him, having two houses means not having a home. Your child's personality is altered because he no longer feels safe. No words of assurance will alter this reality for your child.

Divorce alters your child's personality because he can no longer trust that he can go about his business of growing up. He will be filled with sadness, grief and rage and will exhibit this in his behaviors. Your child's personality will be altered because he will be in a constant state of either low-level or high-level anxiety which inhibits or shuts down the frontal lobes that are needed for thinking, learning and creating, not to mention self-control.

Divorce damages your child because you are focused on your own pain and have a hard time offering your child an appropriate parent/child relationship. Often, children of divorce are put in the middle of the parents' problems and have been known to be used, one parent against the other, or at a minimum receive less than optimal parenting.

Because your child is self-focused he will know that he is responsible for your divorce. No amount of telling him otherwise will ease his guilt, fear and confusion.

Your child's personality will be altered because he will be forced to deal with a reality that you created that he is unable to comprehend, as follows: Because your child is still creating his personality he is focused inwardly

P. Donohue Shortridge

on himself. This internal focus is natural and necessary to his development. However, in the case of divorce, because your child is self-focused he will *know* that he is responsible for your divorce. No amount of telling him

*Your child is powerless
over probably the single most significant event
that will ever happen to him.*

otherwise will ease his guilt, fear and confusion.

Here are some further thoughts:

Adults are motivated to move on and create a new life. Young children cannot do this. They are not future-oriented or able to imagine how it will be OK a few weeks, months or years from now. Your young child lives and thinks in the present and so he is not comforted when you tell him about a better life in the future. He cannot imagine this abstract future. All he knows is the present reality.

Adults are the actors, the agents in a divorce; your child has no say in it. He is at the effect but has no power to stop it or affect it in any way. Your child is powerless over probably the single most significant event that will ever happen to him.

Your child will act out. You can count on this. You will need even more parenting skills now than you have ever needed in the past. This will be extremely stressful on you because of your own problems.

You have broken the trust with you child. You tacitly promised him a family when you chose to have him, and now you are going back on your agreement. You will have to deal with this broken trust.

Your child will not die because you are getting a divorce. But he will not thrive either. Nevertheless, you are responsible for the fact that you have downgraded your child's development. Rather than thriving, he will cope, adjust and make do. And sadly, the consequences reverberate with your child long after he reaches maturity.

Having children is the single most significant decision you will ever make because you are now responsible for shaping the life of another person who is completely dependent upon you. If you decide to have children, there is no going back. It is irrevocable. It is forever. Therefore, it is for adults only. Be sure you're ready to accept that responsibility before you have children. Once you choose to have children, you are no longer a free agent.

*Donohue Shortridge, a Montessorian since 1980 speaks and write on topics related to children and their families in the American culture.
pds@pdonohueshortridge.com*

P. Donohue Shortridge

fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture

P.O. Box 2888 • Littleton, CO 80161-2888 • 303.378.0253 • pds@pdonohueshortridge.com • www.pdonohueshortridge.com