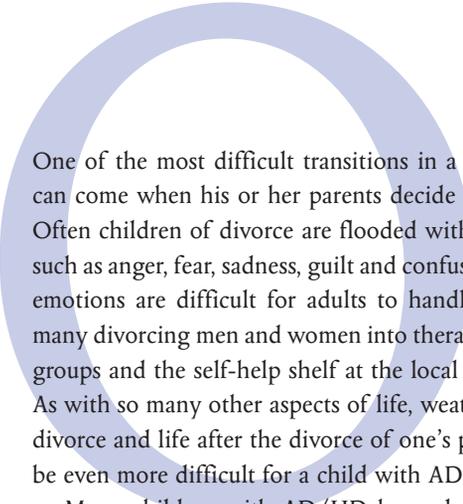


Nurturing the family through

Divorce

by Marcianna Shogan, M.A.



One of the most difficult transitions in a child's life can come when his or her parents decide to divorce. Often children of divorce are flooded with emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, guilt and confusion. These emotions are difficult for adults to handle, sending many divorcing men and women into therapy, divorce groups and the self-help shelf at the local bookstore. As with so many other aspects of life, weathering the divorce and life after the divorce of one's parents can be even more difficult for a child with AD/HD.

Many children with AD/HD have already internalized a sense of shame, guilt and failure because they are unable to accomplish things that come easily for other children, such as making friends, paying attention at school, completing homework, keeping track of belongings, and being able to live up to parental expectations. Maybe the child is already dealing with a negative label from peers and teachers, or has been asked to leave a school because of his or her behavior.

When divorce occurs, children with AD/HD may then experience overwhelming guilt, shame and confusion. Almost all children, especially those younger than 10 years of age, assume some responsibility for the divorce. Children with AD/HD whose behavior may have caused parental disagreements and discord will assume even more guilt. This emotional strain may exacerbate your child's symptoms of AD/HD. It may also result in another disorder such as depression. So how do you meet increasing parental responsibilities while you deal with your own problems?

You are still Parents

Remember, most experts agree that it is not the divorce itself that causes most problems for children, including an increase in AD/HD symptoms, but the amount of conflict that surrounds the divorce. To minimize the negative effects of the divorce on your child, it is crucial to put personal issues aside to better address the needs of the children. That means continuing to work as a team in parenting your children. In fact, as a divorced couple, you may have to improve your parenting skills.

A good family or couples therapist can help you and your spouse negotiate issues that will demand your cooperation. He or she can also recommend parenting classes for divorced couples and should be able to suggest some good books that address these

issues. And, while both of you may remarry at some point, you will still remain your child's mom or dad.

Finally, it is also important that you never make the child the third point of a triangle with you and your ex-spouse. Children should never be used as messengers or spies. They should never be made to feel that loving or missing one parent means being disloyal to the other.

Take Care of Yourself

If you are experiencing anxiety and depression, seek individual help from a mental health professional. A depressed or anxious parent can behave in an irritable or critical fashion to a child who needs extra support and reassurance. Children with AD/HD frequently have already experienced more than their share of criticism. During and after divorce, children need increased support, encouragement and reassurance that they did not cause the problem nor do they have to solve it.

Seek individual therapy if you find your changes in mood are impairing your ability to meet the demands of your life. Joining a group, either facilitated by a therapist or run as a self-help group, can be an efficient way to find relief and the extra support you need. Again, check your local bookstore for practical and inspirational books. When your child sees you getting help, he or she can relax and feel that you will be able to care for him or her.

Take Care of your Children

Many children with AD/HD may already be seeing a therapist. Often this person is best suited to help your child sort out his or her fears and feelings. A therapist should also be able to provide ways to help your child at home, such as special family meetings, reading books together and writing in a journal. Your child may also benefit from group therapy with other children whose parents have divorced. Any avenue for your child to express his feelings provides an alternative to negative behavior, which may hurt himself or others.

Talk to your Children

While it is important not to discuss legal and conflict aspects of the divorce with your child, it is important to keep the lines of communication open. Remember, anxiety can exacerbate AD/HD symptoms. Talking and answering their questions will help alleviate a

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AD/HD and Divorce

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Provide Structure and Predictability

Children with AD/HD may experience less anxiety and increase their ability to focus and concentrate on their own lives when parents provide structure and predictability. Cooperative divorced parents can do this!

During and after the divorce, your child will probably be traveling between two homes for visitation. In spite of his or her age, a child with AD/HD may need help packing for the trip in both directions. It may be helpful to have two sets of essentials, one in each household. This may include pencils and pens, paper, calculators, toothbrushes, pajamas and perhaps a favorite book or toy. It is also important to keep the schedule as predictable as possible. Of course there will be times when travel or illness may demand visitation changes, but it would be helpful to your child

with AD/HD if these occasions are kept to a minimum.

AD/HD Treatment Issues

There are two important treatment issues that apply to children with AD/HD and they may be more difficult to accomplish after divorce when the child is living in two households.

The first is medication. It is vital that you and your ex-spouse agree about your child's medication. If you have conflict in this area, consult together with your child's physician. A third party professional can help settle disputes you may have about the type of medication and frequency of dose.

The second treatment issue is behavior modification. Experts and parents agree that a consistent program of behavior modification is crucial to the management of discipline problems at home and school. The more consistently the program is administered in both households, the less confused your child will be. Less confusion will mean he or she will know that

AD/HD and Divorce

expectations are not going to change with the day of the week. Again, if you and your spouse disagree, a good family therapist can help settle your disputes. On the other hand, your child may benefit from seeing the two of you meeting together on your own to formulate what is best for him or her.

Any behavior modification program should be weighted with positive reinforcement, rewarding good behavior. The program should be simple and age appropriate, and should target areas such as completing homework and cooperating more at home and school. Rewards can be TV or computer time, time with friends, or a special outing, and both short- and long-term rewards are beneficial. Even teenagers benefit from the structure and feedback of behavior modification.

Signs of Crisis

In some cases, a crisis may arise with a child during or after divorce. The child may internalize so much guilt, anger or fear that it evolves into depression, which often exhibits as aggression and may look like a heightened symptom of hyperactivity. Or a child may begin

to withdraw and just look less focused. These signs may be more than an increase in the severity of AD/HD.

Some children may express a wish to die or a wish to kill the parent who left. You may see your teenager take down posters in his or her room, begin to give away things and seem to be saying good-bye to friends. These are issues that need serious attention. No matter how hard you try, you may not be able to help resolve your child's deep, troubled emotions. If you feel your child is depressed, seek the help of a mental health professional as soon as possible.

A divorce situation is never easy, but putting your children's needs first and working as a team with your spouse will help minimize its negative effects on them. Remind your children that you still love them, continue to provide structure and support, and keep the lines of communication open with everyone involved. ■

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Keep in mind that an adult may choose another spouse, but you are the only one who can be your child's mom or dad.