



Children Go Through the Grief Cycle During Divorce or Separation

Even though you may not realize it, divorce or separation will cause your children to go through the same stages of grief that you are experiencing. To the child it is much the same as if there was a death in the family. Each parent or child experiences grief in their own way.

Using steps as an analogy, there are five steps to the grief cycle. Sometimes the steps are steep, sometimes steps are repeated, sometimes you may stay longer on one step than others.

Step 1 Shock and Denial Stage – Your children have a family life that, to them, is “a normal way of life” even if there is conflict. As the family moves from normal functioning through divorce or separation, the children first moves into a shock and denial stage. They have to work to understand the divorce and what is going to happen as a result of the divorce. Parents can help to reinforce the reality of the divorce at this stage and to emphasize that some things will not change – such as the love for your child and that you will be there for him or her.

Step 2 Anger Stage - Next they move into a stage of anger. In this stage parents need to provide support and be there for their children, but understand that this is just part of the grief cycle. They need time to work through their anger and guilt. They will sometimes pick one parent to be mad at and not at the other parent. Know this is normal. Let them know that you understand they are angry and continue letting them know you love them.

Step 3 Depression Stage - As the children sense that their life is falling apart they may withdraw and feel sad and detached from their family and friends. As a parent you need to differentiate between sadness and depression. If as a parent you are concerned that your child is depressed, you may need to get help from a professional.

Step 4 Dialogue & Bargaining Stage - As the children move into the dialogue and bargaining phase, they will try to get the family back together. They will fantasize about reconciliation and will promise to be good if their parents will just reconsider. They may even devise ways to get the parents together such as being sick or getting into trouble at school. This is their way of working through the guilt of feeling that they were the reason for the divorce or separation. Remind them they did not break up the family and it is not likely that they can get the family back together. This too is part of accepting the permanence of the divorce or separation.

Acceptance Stage - Reaching the acceptance stage means that the child has adjusted to the reality and permanence of the divorce and separation. It may also mean, especially for the older children, they are ready to take a chance on love. The entire grief process is one of dealing with loss and requires that children overcome the sense of rejection, humiliation, unlovability, and powerlessness that they feel.

As your children are working through the divorce process encourage the children to maintain their normal schedule and activities. Never put the children's lives on hold. It is important to remember that children go through the grief cycle at different speeds. Some children will be so glad that there is no more conflict, they will not go through the grief cycle. It will depend on each individual's situation and the personalities of each child.