**How children often respond:**

In general:

* Pre-schoolers focus on security.
* Elementary school children show depression and/or anger.
* Middle school students ask why, what is going on?
* High school students question the validity of relationships & commitment.

1. **Infants (0-18 months*)***

***Issues***

* Consistency of caregivers, environment, and routine
* Emotional connection with caregiver
* Nurturing and love

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***What to watch for*** | **Problem** | **No Problem** |
| * Sleeping changes |  |  |
| * Eating changes |  |  |
| * Clingy behavior/difficulty separating |  |  |

***What you can do to help***

* Maintain consistency in people and routines. Change routines gradually.
* Avoid angry expressions and emotional outbursts in front of the baby
* Don’t fight in front of the baby

1. **Toddlers (18 months-3 years)**

***Issues***

* Consistency of caregivers, environment, and routine
* Fear absent parent has disappeared
* Nurturing and love
* Concern about security (who will take care of me?)

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| *What to watch for* | Problem | No Problem |
| * Increased crying |  |  |
| * Trouble getting to sleep/nightmares |  |  |
| * Demanding to be fed by parent instead of feeding self |  |  |
| * Changes in toilet habits |  |  |
| * Increased anger (temper tantrums, hiding) |  |  |
| * Clinging to adults or security objects |  |  |

***What you can do to help***

* Give love and affection
* Provide verbal assurance (both parents say “I love you”)
* Maintain consistency of people and routines
* Assure child they will be cared for
* Provide a clear and simple explanation of changes
* Allow the child to express feelings through words or play
* Avoid angry expressions or emotional outbursts in front of the child
* Avoid fighting in front of the child

1. **Pre-schoolers (3-5 years)**

***Issues***

* Fear of being abandoned/rejected
* Doubts they are lovable (Did my parents leave because I am not good enough?)
* Blame themselves for what is happening (Did I cause this because I was bad?)

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| *What to watch for* | Problem | No Problem |
| * Going back to younger sleeping/eating/talking behaviors |  |  |
| * Clingy behavior/difficulty with separation |  |  |
| * Increased anger |  |  |
| * Increased passivity (over compliance) |  |  |

***What you can do to help***

* Give love and affection
* Provide verbal assurance (both parents say “I love you”)
* Maintain consistency of people and routines
* Assure child they will be cared for and the fighting or separation is not their fault
* Provide a clear and simple explanation of changes that are to occur in the child’s life
* Provide opportunities for the child to express feelings through words or play
* Avoid angry expressions or emotional outbursts in front of the child
* Avoid fighting in front of the child

1. **Young school-age children (6-8 years)**

***Issues***

* Longing for absent parent
* Dreaming about parents getting back together
* Feeling the need to take the side of one parent
* Concern for the parent’s well-being
* Guilt that they are responsible for the fighting and separation

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| --- | --- | --- |
| *What to watch for* | Problem | No Problem |
| * Sadness, grief, crying, sobbing, withdrawal |  |  |
| * Fear of losing relationship with parent |  |  |
| * Fear of losing order in their lives |  |  |
| * Feelings of being deprived or left out |  |  |
| * Anger and increased aggression |  |  |
| * Difficulty playing and having fun |  |  |

***What you can do to help***

* Assure them with words that their parents will continue to take care of them
* Assure them they will continue to see both parents (if this the case)
* Give the child permission to love the other parent
* Don’t criticize the other parent in front of the child
* Don’t put the child in the middle

1. **Older school-age children (9-12 years)**

***Issues***

* May see things as black and white: one parent is right, the other is wrong
* May feel shame or embarrassment about parent’s behaviors or situation
* May feel the separation threatens their own identity
* May feel need to overcome a sense of powerlessness
* May feel loyalty conflicts

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| --- | --- | --- |
| *What to watch for* | Problem | No Problem |
| * Physical complaints (stomachache, fatigue, headaches |  |  |
| * Intense anger, especially at parent they see as to blame |  |  |
| * Taking one parent’s side against the other |  |  |
| * Difficulty with peers |  |  |
| * Difficulty playing and having fun |  |  |

***What you can do to help***

* Listen to child’s feelings and complaints without taking sides or judging
* Don’t criticize the other parent to the child
* Encourage the child to see good in the other parent
* Avoid fighting in front of the child
* Say positive things about the other parent
* Don’t pressure the child to take sides or make the child feel like they have to take sides
* Support the child’s contract with the other parent (if this is possible and safe to do so)

1. **Teens (13-18 years)**

***Issues***

* Upset that parents may be unable to provide needed support and limits
* Already difficult relationship with parent may worsen
* Premature or increased independence
* May be asked to assume more responsibilities at home that pull them away from peers

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| --- | --- | --- |
| *What to watch for* | Problem | No Problem |
| * School problems, such as difficulty concentrating, fatigue |  |  |
| * Acting out emotional distress through sex, drugs, crime |  |  |
| * Internalizing emotional distress; depression |  |  |
| * Anxiety over close relationships |  |  |
| * Grief over loss of family and childhood |  |  |
| * Becoming distant & aloof from family |  |  |

***What you can do to help***

* Provide opportunities for teens to share feelings, concerns, complaints without judging them
* Avoid relying on teens for emotional support, remember you are the adult & they the child
* Don’t pressure teens to take sides
* Say positive things about the other parent
* Allow teens to have appropriate friendship and peer activities

**Worksheet for the parents involved:**

Focusing on the child—useful once you have identified problems in the checklists:

1. How well is my child handling the issues that are listed for their age group?
2. If my child could change one thing about the situation (apart from getting me back with the former partner), what would it be?
3. I have identified the following possible problem areas

a.

b.

c.

I plan to help my child with these problems by:

If I need more help to deal with these problems, I will ask for help from:

a.

b.

c.

I will review this worksheet in \_\_\_\_weeks’ time and make a note of what I have done to deal with the problem’s I have identified