

## ***Overview of developmental characteristics and symptoms of stress for each age group***

Source – *Putting Children First: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive after divorce*, by JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D. Publisher: Avery/Penguin

### ***Infants and toddlers***

#### *Developmental characteristics:*

- Largely dependent on parents for stability and continuity of responsive care.
- Attachment to one and preferably both parents is a major psychological task for infants and young toddlers.
- Even infants experience stress, especially via parent conflict, parental stress and anger.

#### *Signs of Stress*

- Cries or fusses excessively
- Refuses foods once enjoyed
- Is not easily soothed
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Withdraws, appears anxious
- Regresses or backslides in developmental accomplishments
- Becomes ill more frequently
- Cries or becomes clingy when parent leaves the room
- Easily frustrated

### ***18 months- 3 years***

#### *Developmental characteristics:*

- Secure attachment to one parent (and optimally to both) is central to their healthy development
- Still dependent on parents for stability and continuity of care, but beginning around 18 to 24 months, they also begin to need some independence and autonomy. “No!”s and temper tantrums occur side-by-side with exuberant laughter or affectionate snuggles.

#### *Signs of Stress*

- Changes in eating, sleeping, increased irritability or crying, difficult to soothe
- Regresses in developmental accomplishments: lapses in toilet training, baby talk, other behaviors they have outgrown
- Excessive temper tantrums, demanding, defiant behaviors,
- Difficulties separating from a parent, clingy
- Appears sad and withdraws from interaction
- Frequent illnesses

#### *Developmental characteristics:*

- Limited cognitive ability and verbal skills.
- Vocabulary to describe feelings often limited to “good” and “bad”.
- Many misconceptions: Divorce means a new mom or dad, or none at all!

- Limited capacity to understand compound questions.
- May try to answer even if they don't understand
- Does not have an accurate concept of time
- Fears of abandonment and guilt prevalent
- May be fearful about going to talk with a "stranger"
- Usually unable to answer "why" questions

### *Signs of Stress*

- Regression: lapses in toilet training, baby talk, other behaviors they have outgrown
- Demanding, defiant, or uncooperative behavior
- Difficulty separating from parent; clingy
- Difficulties sleeping alone, often related to fears that a parent will "disappear" overnight
- Emotionally fragile, needy, crying easily over "little things"
- Confusion, bewilderment, misconceptions
- Feeling guilty for "causing" marital problems
- Fears of abandonment
- Rigid insistence on routines
- Increased aggressive behavior
- Stomach aches; physical symptoms
- Withdrawal from interaction with others
- Nail biting, chewing on clothes, other anxiety-related behaviors
- Bad dreams, nightmares

### **Ages 6-8**

#### *Developmental characteristics:*

- Limited in capacity to understand complex, abstract concepts. May misunderstand concepts that adults think they know e.g., "minor" is someone who digs for gold...a "D Vorce" is a new kind of car.
- Limited verbal skills may add to misunderstanding of expressions and terms related to divorce and family changes
- Strong sense of fairness, may say, "It's only fair for me to be at both homes the same amount."
- Developing sense of morality, right and wrong; makes it stressful to discover that one or both parents may have done something "wrong"
- Torn between loyalties to both parents
- Feelings of grief, sadness powerlessness
- May feel responsible for marital problems and divorce, especially if they hear their names mentioned during conflict.
- Yearn for reconciliation; try to be extra "good" to increase that possibility.
- May not distinguish (without help) between a normal wish and the responsibility for making the wish come true.

### *Signs of Stress*

- Sad, withdrawn

- Regression to less mature behaviors
- Easily upset
- Increased anger or aggression
- Attempts to be extra good
- Difficulty at school
- Worry about one or both parents
- Physical symptoms: headache, stomach ache
- Separation anxiety
- Loyalty conflicts
- Yearning for reconciliation

### **Preteens: Ages 9-12**

#### *Developmental characteristics:*

- Cognitive growth extends to early abstract reasoning, but limited.
- Meta cognitive development—ability for self reflection emerges.
- They understand that unlike death, divorce is not inevitable—someone made the decision.
- Increased feelings of anger and resentment.
- Use denial and feigned indifference to help cope with feelings of sadness and loss.
- Moral development continues—may hold one parent responsible “the guilty party”.
- Vulnerable to loyalty conflicts
- Increasing importance of peer group in their lives
- May take on role of caretaker
- They want information and input about family changes but are burdened by too much “please, spare the gory details!”
- May be resistant to being interviewed, or talking about feelings, acting as if parents’ divorce is “no big deal”. Respond with acceptance of the child’s ambivalence “you have reasons why you don’t feel like talking...sometimes it’s hard... people can feel more than one way about the same thing...”

#### *Signs of Stress*

- Withdrawal from interaction with parents
- Moodiness
- Loyalty conflicts; aligning with one parent
- Changes in behavior, friendships
- Drop in grades
- Loss of interest in positive activities
- Indifference to matters that were once important
- Changes in sleep/eating patterns
- References to negative wishes
- Intense anger or resentment that does not diminish over time
- Physical symptoms

## **Adolescents: Ages 13-18**

### *Developmental characteristics:*

- Dramatic physical, emotional, and cognitive changes
- Frontal lobe still not completely developed—still under construction!
- Hormonal changes with puberty
- Social life takes on more importance
- See divorce as major intrusion in their lives
- Worries about their future
- Prone to loyalty conflicts
- Usually want to have a *say* about living arrangements and schedules, but do not want to have to *choose between* parents
- Often want flexible schedules to accommodate their needs, and to allow time with both parents

### *Signs of Stress*

- Rebellion or acting out: dress/grooming, substance use, sexual acting out
- Anger, defiance, refusal to abide by established rules
- Drop in grades
- Disengaged at school and at home
- Loss of involvement in activities once enjoyed
- Negative changes in friends
- Withdrawal, isolation, depression
- Extreme moodiness
- References to negative wishes
- Physical changes, excessive weight loss/gain
- Excessive sleep