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## Common Reactions Of Children To Divorce According To Age

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The following information was presented at a workshop by Judy Wallerstein, "The Effect of Divorce on Children and Adolescents"

### **PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

The following reactions all relate to the divorced parents' diminished capacity to care for the children

1. Children may play aggressively.
  2. Latest achievements given up (toilet training, thumb sucking).
  3. Problems with separating from the parent who is in the house.
  4. Fear of sleeping and abandonment (awaken to a house with no adults).
  5. Bedtime trauma.
  6. May be phobic, fearful, irritable. Sees the world as unstable, and may fear that things or people will vanish.
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### **AGE FIVE TO EIGHT YEARS**

1. Have a sense of the custodial parent "winning" in the divorce.
2. Extraordinary crying and loss of absent parent (reactive depression-little boys feel "will I be thrown out next?")
3. Use of fantasy and denial. "Daddy will be coming back."

### **AGE NINE TO TWELVE YEARS**

1. Frequently intense anger.
2. This age child is frequently good at coping and ventilation.
3. Frequently aligns with one parent or the other. Sees a split between the "good" parent and the "bad" parent.
4. Depression reaction, after which anger comes, followed by a sense of powerlessness. If a child feels responsible for the divorce, he might feel powerful.

One-third of the children that Wallerstein has studied in this age range felt that they caused the divorce. These children who feel this way are most likely also to be psychologically disturbed and involved in court/custody battles.

There is a correlation between the length and degree of litigation and the deterioration of divorcing children's mental health. It would therefore seem that the faster the legal process can be completed, the better.

## **ADOLESCENTS**

1. Frequently upset and display regression. "Who am I? What do I want?"
2. Their anxiety is escalated. This relates to the children seeing their parents as:
  - a. sexual
  - b. separated
3. Fear that they will have bad marriages.
4. Worried about their parents:
  - a. they begin parenting their parents
  - b. they befriend their parents (parents usually initiate this with details of their sex lives, marital problems, etc.).

Role reversal with teenagers is very destructive.
5. Teenagers have anxiety relating to entry into adulthood. They are faced with conflict regarding moral issues, i.e. premarital sex.
6. The best adjustment for teenagers includes their strategic withdrawal when parents are "acting out". Kids may be able to keep a distance during the first few months of their parents' divorce.

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Material also gathered from the Menninger Clinic, Topeka, Kansas, Marriage & Family Systems Training Program, 1996.

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