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Familias, Pediatras y Adolescentes en la Red. Mejores padres, mejores hijos.

Children against parents' divorce

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Introduction

In the last decade, separation or divorce among couples is no longer an exceptional situation and has become a frequent one. In this article, the risk factors that some conditions in divorce processes can generate in young children are analysed. There are also some general recommendations that can be helpful when a couple has already decided to end up their marriage.

How are children affected by a separation?

The decision to get separated or divorced means a state of uncertainty and discomfort in adults and children. However, it must be pointed out that parents' decision to end up a love relationship is a much more protective alternative for children (and for themselves) than that of extending family life between them despite being in a situation of emotional divorce.

It is necessary that parents make an effort to avoid that the conflict between them clouds their parental functions. The couple is dissolved but it is necessary for them to continue connected as parents.

The consequences that separated parents' children suffer are related to previous familiar conflicts and with the conflicts linked to separation and, above all, with the roles played by children in this conflict more than separation itself. This, together with age and children maturity, will condition the way in which this separation will affect their development. In *Chart 1* the most frequent consequences for children are contained, taking into account their developmental moment.

Which are the risks that children face when a separation occurs?

Parents' conflicts are the main risk factor for affected children. Most couples who decide to end up their

relationship are within some long evolution relationship conflicts, which are usually difficult to solve immediately. Therefore, it is very important that parents learn to manage the anger level they express and how it is expressed, since the stress level that a child suffers will depend on how adults face the conflict.

Every **attempt to devalue the other parent's image** will not be beneficial for children adaptation in the separation process. A child can sometimes be trapped in a true **loyalty conflict**, a situation in which it is impossible to please two people with opposed interests. They want to be loyal to both and not to disappoint anyone. The most unlucky version is found in the so called **parental alienation syndrome**: a child develops a critical attitude towards their parents, refusing to keep a relationship with them, manipulated by the other one. This is a situation in which one parent is linked to a child, against the other one. Avoiding that a child see the parent without custody, schedule activities that make a child choose between one of them, or trying to replace a father/mother with another couple are examples that mean a risk for the affected child's emotional stability.

Another important aspect to be taken into account is the appearance of **differences in education guidelines** among parents, which can be already present before separation. Children need to have stable and consistent rules and limits, regardless the fact that parents are separated or not. For that reason, it is crucial that parents generate negotiation skills about the guidelines to educate their children. These must include signs of affection and safety as well as discipline and the ability to exercise authority.

It is common that some parents use their **children as intermediaries** to communicate between them, as a way to avoid conflicts. This situation transforms children in "messengers" who send and receive messages that parents are not able to transmit among them. Sometimes children feel obliged to deal with child support or delays in monthly payments, etc. Thus, children assume their parents' problems to manage their own differences. It is very important that parents keep contact between them in order to solve some matters, as economic ones.

Finally, it must be emphasized that, parents' discomfort towards separation is also a risk factor for their children. This discomfort could be mild disorders in adults' mood (anxiety, depression). Getting adapted to the new situation can be a difficult task. A father or a mother in a depression process could not be able to act as parents the way they should and this can go beyond their own control. In these cases, it is fundamental to look for support in order to overcome this loss, sometimes visiting a mental health doctor. The most important thing to minimize this situation's impact in children is not to use them as only support figures, since this can mean a role inversion, being the child the one who takes care of their parent. This situation of children's "*parentification*" can place them in a risk situation towards future emotional disorders.

What can be done in order to contribute to children's adaptation to separation?

In the other side of the same coin, we find several protection factors that can contribute to children's positive adaptation to this new situation of parents' divorce/separation. The main protection factor is that the child **gets on well with at least one of the parents**, even though the most positive thing is to keep a continuous relationship with both.

It is necessary to **avoid arguments and open conflicts** between parents in children's presence, especially in those differences that are related to children's care, as economic or visiting arrangements, etc. Children's interests must prevail over some father's or mother's personal interests.

Promote an **open communication** about what is going on. It is important to help children understand that parents' separation does not imply a loss in the care and affection towards them.

Transmit the importance of the other parent, avoiding bad words about the ex-partner, regardless involved personal factors. It is also important to avoid that other family members, as grandparents or uncles, try to devalue the other parent's image.

Keep an open communication between parents in all aspects related to exercising their function as parents, avoiding using their children as intermediaries in their interactions.

Minimize family changes, as well as scholar and daily routine changes. The process of adaptation towards environment is supported, trying to keep the most similar conditions to the pre-separation previous situation. It is important that siblings keep together most of the time. A privileged attitude towards any children can create a lack of balance that can be felt in a family.

Keep parents' function, with education agreements between both, by means of negotiation strategies. Avoid overprotection or the establishment of too lenient styles that can foster demanding, fanciful or even violent behaviour.

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APPENDIX 1: Chart 1. Children's reaction towards divorce taking into account developmental moment

Developmental moment	COGNITIVE SITUATION	EMOTIONAL RESPONSE
KINDERGARTEN AND PRESCHOOL 4-5 YEARS OLD	They understand physical separation as something temporary. They understand what a relationship between two people is	0 – 2 YEARS AFTER DIVORCE Panic, regression, stunning Negative fantasies, altered game/ Inhibited. Greater emotional needs. Sense of guilt.
6 TO 8 YEARS OLD	They understand divorce purpose They notice physical and psychical effects in parent conflicts.	Sad, missing the absent figure, loyalty conflict, inhibition or parent aggression.
9 TO 12 YEARS OLD	Psychological understanding of divorce reasons. They acknowledge each figure's perspective.	Alterations of identity, somatizations, anxiety. They tend to alienate with one of the parent figures.

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	They don't self-blame.	
12 TO 14 YEARS OLD	They notice communication complexity. They understand stability of personal characteristics	Change in relationships Sad and down Loyalty conflict
15 TO 18 YEARS OLD	Divorce is explained as parent incompatibility They separate parent conflicts from personal characteristics	Changes in family participation Parentification risk