

## Critical Coping Tasks for Children with Separated or Divorced Parents

Children of divorce must resolve six (6) critical psychological or coping tasks in order to grow emotionally. The following is a summary of these tasks:

### 1. Acknowledging the Reality of the Marital Rupture

This task is the first and simplest task for the child. It involves understanding the family and household changes that ensue. Sometimes the power of fantasy is called upon to undo and reverse distressing realities, such as diminished contact with the nonresidential parent. Younger children are especially disadvantaged in grasping the meaning of divorce.

This task is separate from the more difficult task of acknowledging the permanence of the divorce (Task 5). The majority of children master Task 1 by the end of the first year of separation.

### 2. Disengaging from Parental Conflict and Distress and Resuming Normal Pursuits

The second task of the child is to return to customary activities and relationships at school and at play, and to do so with the capacity for learning and for appropriate interests and pleasure unimpaired by the family crisis.

This task has two (2) challenges. First, the child needs to find and maintain some measure of psychological distance and separation from his parents so that s/he can safeguard his or her individual identity and separate life course. The second part of this task requires that the child sufficiently master any anxiety and/or depression so that s/he can remove the family crisis from its commanding position in his or her inner world.

### 3. Resolving Loss

Divorce brings multiple losses in its wake, of which the most central is the partial or total loss of one parent from the family. This task of absorbing loss is perhaps the single most difficult task imposed by divorce. At its core this task demands that the child overcome his or her profound sense of rejection, humiliation, unlovability, and powerlessness which the one parent's departure so often engenders.

This task is most easily accomplished when the loss of the relationship with the father or mother is partial, and the outside parent and child are able to establish and maintain a loving relationship within an ongoing, reliable visiting pattern or under conditions of a good joint-custody plan. Even under ideal conditions, this is no small achievement.

The resolution of this task often lasts many years. Many children fail to negotiate it.

#### 4. Resolving Anger and Self-Blame

Divorce characteristically gives rise to anger at the one parent who sought the divorce or both parents for their perceived unresponsiveness to the wishes of the child to maintain the intact family. The anger that these children experience is likely sometimes to be intense and long-lasting, especially among older children and adolescents who disapprove of the conduct of one or both parents.

Such anger not only keeps children alienated from one parent but often correlates significantly with acting-out behavior at adolescence, including delinquency, school difficulty, and low achievement. Most of all, anger that does not subside seems to keep children from achieving closure with regard to the divorce experience.

The anger does seem to diminish with some perspective regarding the reasons that prompted the divorce and a greater understanding of the parents and their relationship with each other.

#### 5. Accepting the Permanence of Divorce

The child of divorce faces a more difficult task in accepting permanence than does the bereaved child. The living presence and availability of two parents gives continuing credence to the child's wish to restore the marriage. The fantasy of restoration taps into deep wellsprings within the child's functioning and yields to reality only very gradually, perhaps only when the child finally makes and consolidates a clear psychological separation between self and parent during the adolescent years.

#### 6. Achieving Realistic Hope regarding Relationships

This task occupies the child of divorce during the adolescent years and lends an additional burden to the many developmental tasks that the adolescent confronts. As adolescents examine their parents and themselves and consider their future, many become frightened at the possible repetition of marital failure in their own lives.

This last task is built on the successful negotiation of the prior tasks. It integrates the coping efforts of earlier years and provides an opportunity for the full reworking of the impact of the divorce experience.