The Divorce Experience for Preschool Children

The second stage of development is the preschool years from ages three to five. During this period, gains in the areas of cognitive, emotional, and social development bring children from the relatively narrow world of toddlerhood to a readiness to begin elementary school. Despite their considerable developmental achievements, preschoolers have notable limitations that contribute to their experiences of divorce. Causal relationships are understood in egocentric terms. Here "egocentric" does not mean being inappropriately self-absorbed. Rather, it refers to a normal characteristic of young children to ascribe the cause of certain events to themselves. Even adults do this, though usually in a joking way, as they carry the childhood tendency forward. Adults will say, "It rained because I washed my car," or "The Yankees lost because I didn't go to the game." What adults say in jest, preschoolers earnestly believe. A child can believe that a parent's emotional distress or anger, and even the divorce, is his fault.

Children between the ages of three and five also have a great deal of difficulty distinguishing what they imagine from what is real. A fantasy that a strange dog will bite them, that there is a monster in their closet, or that they will fall off a swing can become so compelling that a youngster feels and acts as if it were really about to happen. For children of divorce, this means that fantasies of being abandoned by their mother, unloved by their father, or punished for an angry feeling can create a great deal of distress.

The preschool years are also a time of increased struggles for independence. Attending a day-care center and/or nursery school is common. These experiences provide new opportunities to be separate from par-
ents and become more involved in the social world of peers. Yet a preschool child's sense of social and emotional independence is still tenuous. She must continue to rely on a secure home base in order to consolidate her independence. When a youngster's parents divorce, this security is threatened. Venturing forth into the wider world of day-care centers and nursery schools then becomes more taxing and anxiety arousing.

Preschoolers make another important step developmentally; they develop an attachment to their father which is qualitatively different from the one they have toward their mother and is special in its own right. Boys begin to look to their father as a model for their emerging masculine identity, and girls turn to their father for confirmation of the value and acceptability of their femininity. A father provides a potentially pleasurable alternative relationship to the one with mother and becomes an ally in the child's efforts to emotionally separate from her. Clearly, when divorce makes a father peripheral to the lives of his children, these important contributions are lost or diminished.

Temperament continues to be a major factor in child development during the preschool years. This biologically determined predisposition to respond to the environment in particular ways affects the youngster's experience of events in his life. The preschooler who has an "easy" temperament adapts quickly and comfortably to changes in his world and is not dramatically affected by strong feelings from his parents. On the other hand, the youngster who has a "difficult" temperament is vulnerable to feeling greatly distressed over even minor changes or conflict in his environment. Divorce often means that there will be significant alterations in children's daily routines and child-care arrangements, as well as considerable conflict between parents. Temperament thus plays an important role in the youngster's experience of divorce and his adaptation to it.

The greatest developmental achievement of preschool-age children is a new capacity for abstract thinking. Heightened efforts to understand and master the environment lead preschool youngsters to be more curious about the divorce process and to actively attempt to understand the changes in their lives set in motion by their parents' separation. Not only do preschoolers ask "Why?" and "How come?" and "What if?" questions, but they now have the wherewithal to try to find answers themselves when adults do not provide them. Though they are still limited in their capacity to understand the social, emotional, legal, and financial complexities of divorce, they try to make sense of the new developments they see around them. When they do, they make much use of a newly available cognitive resource—the capacity to produce organized, clear-cut fantasies. These are based on concerns that all preschoolers must cope with: separation from home and parents, their role in causing events in their lives, and how good and lovable they are. When these developmentally appropriate concerns are mixed with a child's bewilderment and distress over the multitude of changes in his life that divorce brings, the result is fantasies that often frighten a youngster and make him sad. It is ironic that the very cognitive capacities which potentially permit preschool-age children to gain a greater understanding of the events in their lives become significant contributors toward psychological pain for them. Rather than reacting solely to having their basic needs unmet and experiencing global, diffuse feelings of anguish, as infants and toddlers do, these youngsters create new and internally driven sources of emotional distress.

The Immediate Crisis Stage

The environmental characteristics of the immediate crisis stage of divorce do not change substantially as a function of the child's age. Whether a youngster is an infant, toddler, preschooler, or even older, many of the family dynamics and events, such as the dislocation of daily routines, hostilities between parents, and emotional upheaval in parents are much the same.

Many youngsters between the ages of three and five are already used to being in day-care or nursery school. It is more likely that mother has returned to work outside the home by the time children reach this age. In fact, the majority of preschoolers in the United States have mothers who are employed part- or full-time outside the home. These children have become accustomed to being in the care of adults other than their parents. The routine of being dropped off at a day-care center, nursery school, or baby-sitter's house and being picked up at least several hours later is familiar and predictable. Preschoolers have had the opportunity to form pleasurable attachments to their adult caregivers and friendships with children their age.

It is extremely helpful for parents to keep the child-care arrangements intact at least during the initial crisis stage of divorce. The predictability
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and familiarity of the schedule and the daily activities and social interactions defining this experience create a feeling of continuity and consistency in a preschooler’s life. Amid all the changes that divorce brings—in schedules of time with each parent, how parents act toward each other, how each parent feels, and possibly less time with mother as she increases her work or educational efforts—the out-of-home caregiving setting can provide a reassuring sense of consistency. When this schedule is disrupted, preschoolers can be expected to show signs of distress in much the same ways that we saw for toddlers whose daily routines became unpredictable. Despite being more advanced developmentally, preschoolers still require a firm sense of consistency in their lives. When changes in the child’s routine are unavoidable, it is necessary to recognize that she will need special help in adjusting successfully to them.

ALLISON was nearly four years old when her parents separated. She had been attending the same day-care/nursery school since she was two-and-one-half years old. For her first year she went half-days for five days a week. When she was three-and-a-half, her mother returned to work full-time as an elementary school teacher and Allison became a full-time nursery school student. She enjoyed her longer hours in this familiar setting and had made an excellent adjustment to the change.

Allison’s mother initiated the marital separation and filed for divorce. Her husband refused to leave the family residence on the advice of his attorney. The attorney claimed that Allison’s father would be in a better bargaining position regarding the financial elements of the divorce settlement if he were not the one who left the family home. Allison’s mother moved out with her. Unfortunately, the apartment she could afford was at a significant distance from the day-care center. Further, the center had become too costly with the parents now maintaining two separate residences. Allison had to leave her old day-care provider for a new, less costly, and more conveniently located home-based center.

Allison’s mother was empathically aware of how hard this would be for her daughter. As a teacher of young elementary school children, she had seen how distressing family moves and attending a new school could be for youngsters. She followed the advice she used to give to parents whose children were changing schools. Three weeks before making the shift to the new center, she explained to Allison that she would be going to a new place each day and would have to say goodbye to everyone at her day-care center. She truthfully told her daughter why this was necessary and that the day-care center would have a going away party for her (something she had arranged for with the staff). Allison was understandably upset initially and cried. She claimed she did not want to go anywhere else. Her mother gently reiterated the reasons for the change and told Allison that the new place was very nice, that the woman who would be there liked girls a lot, and that she would meet new friends there.

Two weeks before the change, she scheduled several visits at the new center. She introduced her daughter to the woman who provided the care, and together they explored the house. Allison had a chance to see the toys and play materials and was told about the activities that were planned each day. She met the six other youngsters who attended the center. Each visit lasted about an hour. Allison, an adaptable girl with an easygoing temperament, quickly found things she liked about the new place. There were neat toys, special magic markers for drawing, and a great tire swing that hung from a large oak tree in the backyard. Two girls were close to her age, and she began playing with them during the visits. The woman she had met also had seemed very nice. The goodbye party at her old center went well, and each of the children in her play group drew pictures for Allison to take with her. When it came time for her to begin going to the new center, Allison had some difficulty separating from her mother. But within two weeks she was comfortable there and had begun to settle into her new surroundings.

The sensitive preparation by Allison’s mother, and the fact that she, herself, was managing her separation from her husband well contributed to her daughter’s good adjustment. The farewell party to mark the end of Allison’s tie to the old center, her mother’s careful explanations of the reasons for the change, holding out to her daughter a confident expectation that she would do well at the new center, and going with her daughter for brief visits to the new center collectively formed a sturdy bridge from one setting to the other. Clearly Allison’s easygoing nature and her previous positive experiences of being separated from her mother and in the care of other adults also contributed to the smoothness of the transition. Without all of these factors, we would expect Allison to have the sorts of difficulties created by disruptions in daily routines which were described in chapter 4.