

Adult Children and Divorce

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If you are experiencing a divorce, and have adult children, you are not alone. Just because your children are grown does not mean they will not struggle emotionally with your divorce. There also may be legal issues regarding your children that must be addressed, even if they are no longer minors.

Family Functioning

Regardless of the age of your children, there are three family processes that predict how well your adult children will adjust to the divorce. The first is how the family functioned before the divorce. A reasonably well-functioning family with open communication will likely adapt better to divorce than a family that does not communicate freely. It is essential that you remain open with your adult children throughout this process.

The second predictor of

adult child post-divorce functioning is the situation that led to the divorce.

Your adult children will be at least somewhat aware of the situations occurring within the family that led to split. If the divorce is amicable and without infidelity, abuse, or other major issues, post-divorce life will likely be smoother for both you and your children.

The last of these three predictors is how your family functions post-divorce. If you are currently in the process of divorcing you won't have control over the first two factors, but you can control how you react to the divorce.

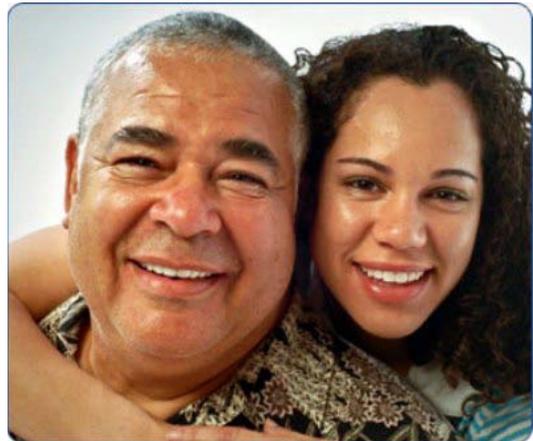
Maintaining a cordial and relatively conflict-free relationship with your ex is essential to helping your children cope with their new life.

Remember, this transition is going to be difficult for both you and your children, whether or not

they live at home. Being able to maintain positive and healthy relationships with them and your former partner can help them cope better (Cooney, 1994).

Adult Child-Parent Relationships

Adult children and their parents often have close and emotionally satisfying relationships. Divorcing when your children are adults can threaten these relationships. For example, Lye (1996) reveals that



when parents divorce, their relationships with their children are often weakened. This is especially true for fathers. By staying actively involved in your children's lives, you can help maintain close relationships.

When you divorce, even if your children are adults,

they often face negative consequences. These consequences are different from those young children experience when parents



divorce.

One unique challenge for young adults is regaining the ability to trust. Because young adult children are often surprised by the divorce and thought things within the family were fine, they develop doubts about their ability to judge relationships. This leads to lack of trust, which can negatively affect adult children's ability to form new relationships (Aquilino, 1994).

The divorce may also negatively affect young adults' relationships with the rest of their family. They might view familial obligations as voluntary after a

parental divorce, resulting in weakened bonds. These weakened bonds can have negative implications if young adults need familial support and have lost those ties.

On the other hand, young adults might also feel overly responsible for maintaining these relationships, especially if one parent becomes isolated from the rest of the family (Pryor, 1999).

What Happens When Divorce is Postponed Until the Children are Adults

It is common for parents who wish to divorce to postpone that event until their children are adults and out of the family home.



This particular decision has

its own negative consequences. If the divorce was postponed, because of them, children often report feeling that they lacked social support growing up (Pryor, 1999). This suggests that even though their parents remained married for their sake, the children were still aware of the tension and suffered from it.

Other children who were unaware of the difficulties their parents were having, face other challenges. They may recognize they were the reason their parents remained married and feel a lot of guilt as they realize their parents remained in an unhappy marriage because of them (Cooney, 1994).

Unique Legal Issues to Parents Divorcing with Adult Children

You may think that because your children are adults, or soon will be, that the divorce should be simple because of the lack of child support and custody issues. In the state of Missouri, however, child support does not automatically end

when a child turns 18. The date that child support stops depends on the child's level of dependency. This can be determined by education, marital status, or other factors. For example, if your child is in college, expect to pay child support past the age of 18 (Child Support in Missouri, 2006).

The federal government, as well as most educational institutions, considers parents to have primary responsibility to pay for their children's college education. As a result, your children's financial dependence does not end when they enter college (Divorce and Financial Aid, 2010).

Also, in Missouri, courts can order the parent without primary custody to pay for college expenses. This includes educational expenses but can also include other needs such as a monthly cash allowance. These payments can be ordered to continue after child support ends (Divorce and financial aid, 2010).

There are tax benefits for paying for your children's college, but you can only

claim these benefits if you also claim the child as a dependent for tax purposes. If you are paying for college and not claiming the child, you may not receive these tax benefits (Divorce and financial aid, 2010).

Responsibility for college expenses can cause conflict between former spouses. By creating a plan for dealing with these expenses, you can help prevent conflict as well as ensure your child that they will be taken care of.



Your Children and Your New Relationship

75% of all divorced adults eventually remarry and most do so within 3 years of their divorce. Even if this seems unlikely in your case, it is important to understand how this can affect your children. Stepfamily issues are difficult for young adults.

new partner.

Your children may experience loyalty conflicts between their other parent and their new stepparent. For example, if they like their stepmother, will that upset their mother? You may also feel torn between your children and your new spouse when conflicts between them arise.

To ease this transition for you, your new partner, and your children, be sure to not set unrealistically high

expectations for bonding. This process will be difficult and the adjustment will take time (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). Your stepfamily may grow to be a loving, supportive group, but this will not occur immediately, so be patient.

How to Make this Transition Easier for You and Your Children

- Let your adult children dictate their own custody arrangements. By allowing them the freedom to decide (especially if they are age 18 or older) you will prevent resentment about arrangements you created.
- Encourage your children to stay in contact with their other parent. Often times divorces are filled with feelings of hurt and anger but maintaining relationships with both parents throughout can help ease your children through the transition.
- Create a parenting plan for your adult children that includes expenses such as college, insurance, cell phones, etc. Ensuring them that you have a plan to work with your ex-partner on your children's financial needs can help prevent arguments over these issues later.

Helpful Resources for You and Your Children

Parentlink's Warmline:

Answers parenting questions and free library of books and videos
1-800-552-8522

Parents without Partners:

A support group for single parents
573-443-7316

Family Counseling Center:

Counseling and education for the whole family and free parenting skills workshops
573-449-2581

Mid-Missouri Legal

Services Corp.:

Free legal aid to qualified individuals
573-442-0116

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