

COMPLIANT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE: ASSESSMENT, RISKS & WHAT TO DO

Children of separation don't know how to feel, what to do or what to say, so they are MORE likely than their peers to watch and follow their parents' example, for better or worse.

They may have limited internal resources for making sense of the words/concepts of "separation" or "divorce." They have no control over this family breakdown and don't know how long it will last – that kind of ambiguity breeds intense anxiety.

Children who "act out" during separation/divorce get attention, and parents are more likely to recognize it as a "cry for help." Mental health professionals worry more about the children who "act in" and whose parents mistakenly assume "they're fine." Take special care to notice the children who appear "fine."

UNWANTED LESSONS Compliant Children risk learning during Separation/Divorce:

1. ***If I contain my upset and look "fine," I won't be their "last straw," and I won't get left.*** My being mad, sad or scared could be what tips the balance. I don't say how I really feel. RISK: future depression, anxiety and difficulty making healthy, authentic attachments.
2. ***I will divorce myself from my family and act like it's all "fine."*** My parents think it's okay to break up our family. So, I'll go beyond just suppressing my feelings. I'll "break away" and deny my unique family experience. RISK: Distorted reality and distancing defenses in parental relationships easily persist into adult relationships.
3. ***They don't notice or care how I truly feel – just say 'yes' if they ask if I'm okay, and 'no' if they ask if something's wrong.*** RISK: learns s/he's unlovable (invisible) and is either neglected or treated poorly in adult relationships.
4. ***I'm ashamed my parents are separating/divorcing, on top of all my other feelings. I will communicate in a guarded, restricted way to keep from being overwhelmed.*** RISKS: Shame is often too much for a child to face and resolve alone. Deferred/denied feelings that are left unexpressed will eventually resurface in the guise of other symptoms: limited, inauthentic or destructive love relationships, insomnia, suicidal thinking, poor academic performance, running with the "wrong" crowd, drug/alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, etc.

Divorcing parents are often, understandably, consumed with their own difficulties and losses. Furthermore, they often have a hard time being "neutral" listeners when parenting plans and child support are in the process of being determined. Children feel all the tension surrounding them, even if it's in the "background."

What to do? Come together as co-parents to select a Collaborative Child Specialist, and give the therapist *and* your child explicit permission to focus exclusively on what's most effective for your child in the long run. Consider joint sessions; Be open to coaching and learning. Pursue therapy for your self as well as your child if the Child Specialist thinks it would be useful. Do your best to keep your co-parenting respectful and peaceful. Hire a co-parenting specialist if you find yourselves unable to master the skills needed to keep your children out of the middle.