How to Speak Your Child's Developmentally Appropriate Language

What is Attachment Theory?

Attachment theory is a framework that describes the bond between a baby and their primary caregiver. It is critical for the baby's survival and lays the foundation for their emotional and social development later on. A secure attachment can mean better adult relationships. Insecure attachments can lead to troubles with future relationships.

There are four attachment styles :

- Secure attachment
- Anxious attachment
- Avoidant attachment
- Disorganized attachment

How Attachments are Formed

Attachment theory says that the first two years of a baby's life are the critical time for forming their attachment style. Secure attachment is the goal. Babies who form secure attachments to their primary caregiver are more likely to become adults who confidently seek out healthy relationships with others and are reliable and loving partners themselves.

Here's how the four styles develop:

- **Secure attachment** is the result of a caregiver consistently responding to their baby's needs. The baby learns that the world is safe and people can be trusted.
- **Anxious attachment** can happen when a baby's primary caregiver is inconsistent in meeting their needs. The baby learns that they may or may not get what they need, so they aren't easily comforted.
- **Avoidant attachment** is most likely to form when a caregiver doesn't provide a baby with enough emotional support. The caregiver's responsiveness mostly ends with caring for the baby's physical needs, like feeding and bathing.
- **Disorganized attachment** often forms through a particularly tumultuous childhood and is marked by fear or trauma.

Stages of Attachment

- **Pre-attachment (birth to 6 weeks)**: Infants don't have a preference for any particular person.
- **Attachment-in-the-making (6 weeks to 7 months)**: Baby starts to recognize and prefer familiar people but will accept care from others.

- **Clear-cut attachment (7 to 24 months)**: Baby forms a stronger attachment for a primary caregiver and prefers them to all others. This is often the high point of separation anxiety.
- **Reciprocal relationship (24 months+)**: Toddlers begin to understand that caregivers have needs and feelings, too, and that their absence is temporary. They also begin to form relationships with other people.
  The relationships young babies and toddlers develop with their caregivers set the stage for their future development.

Why Attachment Style Matters

Your attachment style, and how it meshes with your co-parent's style, can have a hefty impact on your ability to develop healthy and loving relationships and friendships. It can also influence how well you trust others.

Attachment styles can affect:

- Communication between partners
- The risk of relationship violence
- Overall marriage quality
- How you form relationships with your own children, leading to generational effects
  A secure attachment in your toddler years doesn't guarantee happily ever after. And an insecure attachment doesn't have to be your destiny either. People in your life and the relationships that form are complicated. Life experiences can change you and help you grow.

The Case for Overnights

Some research places emphasis on the long-term rather than short-term effects on parent child-relationships:

- Equal numbers of overnights (at each parents' home) were associated with long term benefits for parent-child relationships with both parents
- Benefits in mother-child & father-child relationships were observed in overnights even when children were two years old and under the age of one
- These benefits were noticed regardless of whether parents initially agreed or disagreed about overnights
- Young adults who had more overnights with both parents felt closer to their parents and were more likely to remember their parents as having been warm and responsive during their childhood
  This suggests it is favorable for young children to have an even balance of time and contact between the homes of separated parents.

Factors in Deciding Levels of Overnight Care

1. The child's safety with each parent, and parents' safety with each other
2. The child's trust and security with each parent
3. Parent mental health
4. The young child's health and development
5. The young child's behavioral adjustment
6. Qualities of the co-parental relationship
7. Pragmatic resources
8. Family factors: extended and cultural

Parents should make plans that:

- Support the development of organized attachments to each parent/caregiver
- Encourage parenting interactions that support the development and maintenance of attachments with each parent
- Provide the young child with support to transition between parents
- Reflect practical considerations
- Maximize the amount of time the young child is cared for by a parent in person
- Encourage shared decisions about major child-related issues

Effects of the Challenges on the Family Transition by Ages

All family members are affected by the transitions associated with parents living in two homes. Being aware of your children's individual needs will make it easier for you to make healthy decisions for them. While responses vary with age, and some issues are unique to only certain age groups, many children experience sadness, anger, anxiety, fear, rejection, and loneliness. There is no definitive evidence that their parent's break-up is easier or more difficult on one age group than another. Even though your child might be very intelligent, and seemingly able to understand everything, this understanding will grow deeper as your child matures.

Communicate with your children about the change that is happening in your family. To do this, you must be at least somewhat comfortable talking about these issues. Or, as an alternative, you can be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. It might be difficult for your children to see you struggling emotionally, but it is a valuable life lesson for them to see you deal with difficult issues and recover from them. You should speak with your children at their appropriate age levels. With all children, your communications should include ample doses of love and affirmation. Encourage your children to ask questions, and allow them to express emotions. By allowing your children to express their concerns and feelings, you are keeping the lines of communication open and teaching them coping strategies. At first, it might be difficult to witness your child's emotional reactions. It is important for you to not overreact to what they are feeling. Let them know it is OK to feel that way, and that feelings are temporary and likely to change.

What your infant may be experiencing:

Infants and toddlers need consistency in their contact with parents. Unpredictable daily routines, hostility between parents, or frequent exposure to emotional upset are central sources of psychological stress. Infants distressed by major changes in their routine may exhibit sleeping or eating/digestive problems, or excessive crying.

To help your infant cope with the challenges:

It is very important for the child that the same people be there as often and as consistently as possible. A predictable, consistent and familiar environment is critical. Infants have a limited memory, but it is recommended that the noncustodial parent spend at least a few hours with an infant every two or three days. These visits should be characterized by lots of cuddling, storytelling, and playing. Parents should be able to soothe and cuddle with the infant as much as possible.

What your toddlers (18-24 months) may be experiencing:

Toddlers are challenged differently than infants. While they are working on the developmental achievements of separation and individuation, they still have many dependency needs. Toddlers are also dealing with security issues when they are apart from their parents. A parent's partial or complete disappearance can be a frightening experience. Toddlers may exhibit many of the same symptoms as infants; it is also common for toddlers to show heightened irritability, aggression, lethargy, temper tantrums, night terrors, and regression, including the loss of previously acquired toilet-training skills. Heightened separation anxiety from either parent is another common symptom at this age.

To help your toddler cope with the challenges:

Whenever and wherever possible, create stability. Infants and toddlers need a stable environment and regular schedules. Under most circumstances, frequent contact with both parents is best. This type of regular interaction, coupled with paying attention to a child's individual needs, helps create a healthy and secure environment. Children need to feel safe, loved, and that their growing development is supported. This is a time when the child needs to feel "I can do it!" and that at least one loved parent is watching.

Like infants, toddlers thrive on schedule and routine, and they enjoy a lot of parental contact. When it comes to visitation, toddlers also thrive best with a regular schedule that is comfortable for both parents. In some families, this will include daytime contact several times a week and regular telephone calls a few times a week. In other families, overnight stays with the non-resident parent can take place. Parents need to figure out what works best for their kids. Unless there are special or unusual circumstances, parents should be supportive of overnight stays with the nonresident parent. Remember to make time for lots of cuddling, playing, fantasy, and make-believe.

What your preschooler may be experiencing:

Children in the three- to five-year-old range have limited ability to make sense of parental loss, and they may blame the situation on themselves. They may believe that a parent's emotional distress or anger is their fault. Regression to earlier behaviors is common; for example, loss of developmental accomplishments in sleeping, eating, motor activity, language, toilet training, emotional independence, and social relationships. There may be excessive clinging or crying when a parent leaves to go to another part of the house, and transitions between homes are frequently difficult. Expressions of anger and temper tantrums are common in preschool children. It is important for parents to see these reactions as normal and appropriate given the situation. Most of these setbacks and problem behaviors will diminish in time.

To help your preschooler with the challenges:

Keep in mind that most children this age have some separation anxiety, whether their parents are together or not. A change in the family dynamics might intensify that anxiety. Children accustomed to having both parents at home can become anxious at the thought of one parent moving out. Reassure children that the change means that they will have two homes now. Take them to the new home (both parents together, if possible) and show them where Mom or Dad will be staying. The more comfortable you are with separating physically, the more comfortable your child will be. Reassurance with hugs and words like "I love you, you'll be OK, your mom and dad will make sure things are OK".

Children need consistent and predictable routines in both homes with some advanced warning of changes. Contact with both parents should be conflict free and predictable. Regular and frequent visitation by the noncustodial parent is also important. You will find that your efforts at providing a stable routine for your preschooler will pay off. It will help them feel secure. In addition, regular contact with the nonresident parent will help minimize or eliminate any feelings of rejection. Parents can reduce their child's stress by maintaining a daily routine, eliminating open conflict, and gaining emotional stability for themselves. Avoid speaking negatively about the absent parent and focus more on giving your child permission to stay connected with the absent parent. Telephone contact between parents and children should be encouraged.

It is very important to reassure your young children that the changes in the family are not their fault. Relationships, you should explain, are very complicated, and sometimes they end before people expect them to. Just as their behavior was not the cause, they should be reminded that it is not their responsibility to keep their parents together. You can also remind them that you will always be a family, and that both parents will always love and care for them. Children this age will understand these ideas to varying degrees. As they get older, it will still be important for children to hear this, but they will understand it differently.

What your six to eight-year old child may be experiencing:

Early elementary-age school children are developing feelings of competence and mastery. Children undergoing a change in their family at this age may also regress and show less

initiative or willingness to use previously acquired skills. They may exhibit anxiety, restlessness, increased moodiness, tantrums, or separation problems. Signs of sadness, stress, or depression may take the form of physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach problems, and tiredness. You might also see a withdrawal from peers and pleasurable activities, a refusal to do homework or go to school, and changes in bedtime routine, among others. These symptoms are often a child's attempt to get reassurance or increased contact with parents.

Young children will often struggle to be loyal to both parents. This struggle might be expressed in many ways; it may take the form of trying to over please parents and be perfect. On the other hand, it might be expressed through anger toward one or both parents. Keep in mind that a range of reactions is possible. You will probably be challenged by your children's reactions because you don't want to see them hurt, which will increase your own stress level. Remind yourself that these responses are normal, and in time you should see a great improvement. Allow yourself to notice times when your child is coping well with the situation. Let them know you notice their efforts and are proud of them.

To help your six to eight-year-old cope with the challenges:

The foremost protective factor for young children (all children!) is to minimize parental conflict, especially when children are present. Children openly exposed to such conflict, whether overt or subtle, tend to have poorer psychological adjustment to the changes that are happening. Second, parents need to provide warmth and emotional support, adequate monitoring, authoritative discipline, and age-appropriate expectations. Younger children who receive these protective factors adjust far better than children whose parents are inattentive or less supportive, or use coercive discipline. Lastly, significant contact with both parents following is crucial. Several studies have found that children who maintain close relationships with both parents have more positive adjustment and better academic performance than those who do not.

Make teachers aware of the transitions going on with your child, and ask them to be prompt in discussing any of their concerns with you. It's important to address school/peer problems early in this stage. Make allowances with the time-sharing schedule to let the child engage in outside activities and for friendships to develop. Give child reassurance with clear, understandable explanations and remove child from parental disputes even if you feel they are old enough to handle it. Continue consistency in routines and avoid making them feel overwhelmed with too many responsibilities.

Encouraging them to develop connections with you and your co-parent's significant relatives. Children who have relationships with their grandparents have higher life satisfaction, self-esteem and feelings of being in control of their lives. Extended family can offer benefits to children regardless of their parents' relationship status, but those strong relationships particularly matter for children whose parents have separated.

What your nine to twelve-year old may be experiencing?

Elementary-school children feel extreme loss when the separation occurs, but it is not impossible for parents to rebuild a child's sense of security. Keep the lines of communication open, but don't press your children to express their feelings if they are not ready to. Older elementary-school children may experience divided loyalties, which can be especially painful if one or both parents attempt to enlist the child "on their side" in an adversarial separation. These children frequently convert painful feelings of loss, helplessness, and sadness into anger, which is more tolerable to them than emotional vulnerability.

Low self-esteem and decreased academic performance are also common. Anger directed at one or both parents is not uncommon. Children may take on the belief system of the parent they feel is being treated unfairly (usually the one who was more hurt). An alliance with one parent can be comforting to that parent, but it is not a healthy situation. Parents should not encourage such alliances, no matter how vindicated it makes them feel. Doing so can help foster feelings of guilt when the child is older.

Also common at this age are changes in the amount of time spent with peers. You might see an increase in time your child spends with friends or a sharp decline in peer interactions. Both can be normal, and you should make room for either reaction. At the same time, be aware of behavior at either extreme. Not uncommon is for children this age to fantasize about parents getting back together. Look for opportunities to discuss gently and respectfully the reality of this hope.

Look for signs that your child may be over-functioning. Some children this age try to act perfectly so as not to disappoint their parents. They live with the idea that if they behave perfectly, their parents will get back together. At the other extreme are children who begin to regress into behaviors they had long since abandoned. Again, you should be prepared for both possibilities and make room for either if they occur.

Physical complaints parents should be aware of include headaches, stomachaches, changes in sleeping habits, and appetite changes, among others. Most of these physical complaints should ebb in time. If you notice them for extended periods (longer than 2 months) you should consult your family physician or a mental-health professional.

To help your nine to twelve-year old cope with the challenges:

It is best to communicate clear and consistent expectations to your child. Let them know that their feelings are valid, but how they express them is important. For example, let them know that their anger is normal, and offer them positive alternatives for expressing it. There should be consequences for bad or inappropriate behavior, and parents should not feel guilty about disciplining their child. Take physical complaints seriously, however; remember that a child's reaction to stress is often manifested through a physical complaint. Whenever possible, keep your children involved in healthy activities including sports, clubs, or creative outlets. Remember to support their interests, and make what is important to them important to you. Both parents should be involved in a child's extracurricular activities. Children will

sense and react to a parent who is too busy to spend time with them, and this is one of many ways to show that you are concerned and involved.

What your teen may be experiencing:

Adolescence is a period of substantial flux on all developmental fronts. Teenagers are dealing with their emerging sexuality, solidifying their identity, coping with peer pressure, and moving toward increased autonomy. When parent's separate, adolescents must deal with these developmental issues as well as adjust to the changes in their family. While some teens fare well as they face these challenges, others exhibit moderate to severe emotional distress. This distress will most likely be manifested in most or all areas of a teen's life.

In addition, adolescents and teens are capable of expressing their distress in alarming new ways. Teenagers can exhibit intense anger, abuse illicit drugs or alcohol, engage in sexual activities, physically hurt themselves, run away, or get in trouble with the law. They may also strongly align themselves with one parent. Dealing with parental dating or remarriage can be especially difficult for children in this age group and may elicit strong emotional reactions from your teen.

To help your teen cope with the challenges:

More than ever, teens need emotional support, love, and firm guidance from their parents. When challenges do arise, parents need to distinguish between a normal adolescent response and something deeper and more serious. For example, many parents need to differentiate between normal mood swings and the anger and depression associated with the stresses of the changes in the family. This is easier said than done. Teenagers' depressed feelings can mirror classic symptoms of depression. Trouble sleeping, sleeping too much, poor concentration, low energy or fatigue, feelings of hopelessness, and depressed mood are all possibilities. You might also see increased irritability, withdrawal from friends or family members, suicidal thoughts, fighting, and highly dangerous acting-out behaviors such as self-cutting. If you have any doubts that the anger or depression that your adolescent is feeling goes beyond what might be considered normal given the situation, you should immediately consult a mental-health professional to get another opinion.

Encourage your teenager to communicate without pressing them to do so. Show respect for their boundaries, but be on the lookout for opportunities when they want to talk. It is not uncommon to hear a response of 'fine' to all of your inquiries about how they are doing. This is typical, as many teenagers will not want to discuss the changes in the family or their feelings. Let them know this is OK, while occasionally reminding them that you are willing to talk when they are. Giving them permission not to talk about their feelings also gives them room to talk with you when they are ready. Reassuring and approving of their unique and individual responses are vital during this transition time.

As with other age groups, consistency around rules and expectations is vital. At the same time, you should be flexible when necessary. Remember to support your teen in whatever hobbies, interests, or activities they are involved in. Many adolescents react by distancing from family members and immersing themselves in an outside activity. If this is the case, you should look for help from extended family members, teachers, coaches, and anyone else in the community who can be of help. Keep in mind that most teenagers reconnect with their family once the transition in the family becomes more familiar.

Most experts agree that an important way of empowering teens is to involve them in decisions regarding living arrangements, school, and visitation, where appropriate. This will give them a sense of control and help them feel like part of the process, instead of totally removed from important decisions affecting them. In addition, remind yourself that there will be ups and downs during the process, but that teens can cope successfully with their parents' breakup and the changes it brings. You may even discover some unexpected positives. Many teens are relieved to find their parents are actually happier. They may even develop new and better ways of relating to both parents when they have separate time with each one.

Some teens become more compassionate and kinder when a younger brother or sister needs their support and care. Siblings who are closer in age may form tighter bonds, learning to count on each other more because they're facing these challenges together. They may become more responsible, independent, and thoughtful. Some become better problem solvers, better listeners, or better friends.

Most teens learn—sometimes to their surprise—that they can make it through this difficult situation successfully. Giving it time, letting others support them along the way, and keeping an eye on the good things in life can make all the difference.

What your college age child may be experiencing?

- A sense of relief
- Feelings of being torn
- Uncertainty and fear about continued or future education
- Yearning for an intact family
- Difficulty determining how to confide in one parent or the other
- Apprehension about repeating the pattern of an unsuccessful marriage

To help your college age child cope with the challenges:

- Provide a safe and inviting place to come home to
- Allow them to vent
- Be specific about financial arrangements for college
- Encourage contact with both parents
- Keep clear parent-child boundaries
- Assure him that you will handle holidays, celebrations and special events

- Be open to discussing her fears about marriage and assure them that they can be successful
- Maintain and/or create family rituals around special occasions

The Special Needs Child

As it relates to the next section in this course, the term “special needs” includes any mental health or physical diagnosis such as ADHD, anxiety, depression, learning differences, medical needs and developmental delays such as autism or intellectual disabilities.

The best interest of the child in these cases include the child’s age, the relationship the child has with each parent, the mental and physical health of the parents, and whether or not a parent has a history of domestic abuse.

Professionals have found that children with special needs can be at greater risk of experiencing adverse reactions to their parents separating. They may have difficulty with change and transitions and will benefit from physical, emotional, and social support. Parents are encouraged to be consistent with parenting practices and schedules and limit any displays of friction towards each other. Frequent back and forth between homes as well as different rules and schedules can be very stressful for a special needs child. it is recommended to warn the child ahead of time about any changes that may be taking place in the near future.

Many children with special needs have low resilience and may exhibit one or more of the following behaviors because of the change in their schedule due to their parents’ break-up:

- Behavioral regression or temper tantrums lasting longer than should be expected.
- Inability to calm themselves as they had done in the past or in comparison to same-age peers.
- Inability to put words to feelings.
- Drop in focus at school and possibly a decline in grades.
- A tendency to keep to themselves more than normal.

Actions to consider:

- Co-Parents should be same page regarding their child’s disabilities and abilities. If necessary, a child custody evaluation may be needed to provide the information required to determine the child’s individual needs.
- It may be beneficial that your family law attorney work with outside counsel such as an experienced financial adviser and/or attorney that specializes in children with special needs to eliminate any possible risk of forfeiting the child’s entitlements.
- If your child’s special needs will extend well beyond the statute of limitations, it will be important to factor in the financial and parental responsibilities of the child in the parenting plan for the long-term. Consider items such as a special needs trust, applicable public health benefits and long-term care insurance.

- In-kind alimony and/or child support should be considered in order to preserve government benefits. Depending on the severity of a child's issues, that child may need to receive government benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as an adult. If awarded, child support payments are considered unearned income to an adult special needs child and could make the child ineligible for needed benefits.
- A parenting plan should spell out essential information and instructions regarding the specialized needs of the child. The visitation schedule, an outline of the child's daily routine, medical appointments, therapy sessions, and any other necessary accommodations will be need to be clarified.
- Many child support calculation charts do not address the extra expenses of a child with special needs such as the specialty medical care needed, physical or mental health therapies, as well as medical equipment or the additional supplement and dietary requirements. Be sure to make note of those on a separate page as an addendum.

Other factors that should be considered:

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): Parents should ensure that the child continues to receive appropriate educational support with the implementation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that addresses the child's unique educational needs and goals.

Choosing the Right School: Consider schools with specialized programs and resources that cater to the child's needs.

Legal Guardianship: Creating wills and guardianship documents to secure the child's long-term well-being.

Respite Care: Parents may require respite care and/or support from extended family members to manage the additional demands of caring for a special needs child.

Community Resources for Additional Help:

To locate a qualified therapist, visit www.aamft.org

For Evidence-Based Parenting Program Resources:

https://www.abct.org/fact-sheets/parenting-programs/#

Positive Coping Traits Children Develop:

1. *Ability to deal with change:* Children of parents that separate often learn to adapt to changing circumstances more quickly than other children. This often reinforces a sense of inner strength and resilience.

2. *Skill in expressing feelings*: Throughout the process, children often have to deal with a wide range of emotions. This can facilitate recognition of different feelings and ways to express them that are healthy.
3. *Greater sense of independence:* Children often become more responsible for themselves and their siblings at an earlier age.
4. *Willingness to seek help*: Children may have a more realistic sense of their abilities and weaknesses and may be more willing to seek assistance when needed.
5. *Openness to diversity:* Children whose parents who aren't together are often exposed to a wider range of diversity and lifestyles. This exposure can be beneficial in a variety of ways and contribute to long-term adjustment in many of life's challenging situations.

Warning Signs of Serious Problems

If things get worse rather than better after several months, your child may be experiencing depression, anxiety, or anger. Watch for these warning signs:

- Sleep problems
- Poor concentration and trouble at school
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Self-injury such as cutting or eating disorders
- Frequent angry or violent outbursts
- Withdrawal from friends and family members
- Disinterest in outside activities

When a child or teen shows any significant sign of distress, or when some of the symptoms we have been talking about become chronic or extreme, you may want to consult a mental health professional. Marriage and family therapists are typically the most qualified through their extensive training in dealing with families in transition. A qualified therapist can provide a safe place for children to express their feelings, to understand the changes happening in their lives, and to develop coping strategies. Therapists can also raise parents' awareness of the dynamics that hamper children's positive adjustment. When possible, both parents should be involved in the counseling. Some parents report not wanting to be in the same room with their co-parent. Remember, this is about your children and doing what is best for them.

A note about staying together for the kids:

Often, high conflict couples—and chances are you know at least one or two—stay together for their children's sake. While this is very noble, most experts now agree that it is far better to provide a conflict-free environment for your children than to stay together. Children who] come from low-stress and low-conflict homes are more equipped to face life's challenges. They exhibit fewer behavior problems, are less likely to experiment with drugs or alcohol, and overall show more promise than children who come from high-conflict homes. Although these are generalities, it's worth working on providing a low-stress and positive family home environment for yourself and your children.

What are other ways to help your child cope with the challenges?

- Encourage discussing their feelings, but do not pressure kids to open up.
- Be consistent with consequences when rules are broken (avoid physical punishment and name calling).
- Ask yourself whether a problem behavior is typical for your child's age.
- Identify times when your children are behaving well and tell them so.
- Make room for angry and sad feelings, realizing this is normal and temporary.
- Provide kids with age-appropriate activities and hobbies.
- Teach children to leave a situation if they are losing control.
- Realize there is a connection between conflict with your co-parent and your child's acting out.
- Realize that most challenges and behavior problems will be temporary.
- Seek outside help when problem behaviors are chronic, dangerous, or extreme.

Understanding Grief and Loss Related to the Changes in Your Family

Grief is defined as the conflicting feelings caused by a change in or an end to a familiar pattern of behavior. Not surprisingly, children's experiences of grief will vary depending on their age and individual circumstances. Sometimes the changes in the family precipitate a grief response that is mild and transient, while others threaten the foundation of a child's world. Young children express grief in vastly different ways from teens and adults.

Although the grieving process can be difficult, it is ultimately a healing process. Becoming aware of the stages of grief and working through them ultimately helps us resolve difficult issues and move on. Below are general stages of grief, along with some of the ways children of different ages and adults deal with grief. Keep in mind that moving through various stages of grief is a normal way for children to deal with loss. These stages may vary in order, occur simultaneously, or recur after progress into the next stage. Although painful and difficult, the end result is healing, which ultimately leads to growth.

The Stages of Children's Grief

Disorganization: The initial expressions of grief in children range from regression, temper tantrums, and exaggerated fears in younger children to physical symptoms, lack of concentration, and mood swings in older children. The disorganization of early grief is a true crisis for children, but parents and loved ones can help a child through this stage.

Transition: Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair follow the stress and chaotic behaviors of the disorganization stage. Many children will exhibit signs of depression. More common are withdrawal, aggression, and difficulty in school.

Reorganization: When painful feelings are expressed, their emotional energy wanes, and detachment becomes possible. During this stage, children have more energy and motivation for moving forward to a positive resolution of their grief.

Though children's grief follows this progression, it is complicated by the circular nature of grief. If you've experienced grief in your life, you know this to be true. Just when you have moved forward in your resolution of grief, some reminder of the loss floods you with emotions that bring you right back to feelings of despair and great sorrow. Adults can recognize and understand what is happening with their emotions; children often cannot. Parents must recognize the circular nature of grieving in order to help their children through difficult times during their development.

The final consideration in helping children successfully manage the grieving process is the developmental age of the child. It is important to note that a grieving child's developmental age may lag behind his chronological age. Regression is expected, and developmental accomplishments take longer to achieve.

How Preschoolers Express Grief

- Bedwetting
- Thumb sucking
- Clinging to adults
- Exaggerated fears
- Excessive crying
- Temper tantrums
- Regression
- Stubbornness

Helping the Grieving Preschooler Cope

- Answer the child's question honestly and simply; allow them to talk about the loss; help them share their fears and worries.
- Provide simple routines.
- Give the child affection and nurturing; attempt to connect.
- Provide more opportunities for play.
- Be patient with regressive behaviors such as thumb-sucking.
- Provide opportunities for the expression of painful emotions through play, creative outlets, and talk. Teach them to recognize and name their full range of feelings.

How Elementary-School-Age Children Express Grief

- School and learning problems
- Preoccupation with the loss and related worries; daydreaming; trouble paying attention; bedwetting; regression; developmental delays
- Eating and sleeping problems (overeating, refusing to eat, nightmares, sleepiness)

- Fighting, anger

Helping the Grieving Elementary-School-Age Child Cope

- Keep tasks simple. Explain things before they experience them: new neighborhood, school, church, family routines, and changes.
- Provide a structured environment that is predictable and consistent; limit choices; introduce small, manageable choices over time.
- Contain acting-out behavior; insist that children express their wants, needs, and feelings with words, not by acting out.
- Encourage them to let you know when they are worried or having a difficult time.

How Pre-Teens and Early Adolescents Express Grief

- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping and eating disorders, hypochondria), wide mood swings
- Able to verbally express emotions
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Increase in risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors
- Anger; aggression; fighting; contrary or combative behavior
- Withdrawal from adults or peers
- Depression; sadness
- Lack of concentration and attention
- Identity confusion; testing limits

Helping the Grieving Pre-Teen and Early Adolescent Cope

- Accept that they will experience mood swings and physical symptoms.
- Encourage them to honestly recognize their painful feelings and find positive outlets in physical and creative activities.
- Listen for the feelings behind their words and actions, and respond with empathy.
- Be truthful and factual in explaining the loss.
- Help them develop and maintain their sense of identity.
- Allow pre-teens to make choices that are not harmful. Encourage safe expressions and experiences of beginning independence.

The Adult Grieving Process

Adults have a different grieving process. Knowing these stages can be useful for understanding how your own grieving process might proceed and will allow you to track your progress. Remember that everyone’s grief journey is unique, and there is no specific time-frame for it. Although grief is different for each individual, finding a way through it successfully requires some knowledge and understanding of the grief experience and the work of mourning. The initial reaction to a traumatic event is shock—an inability or unwillingness to believe what is happening.

After the initial shock, most people proceed through all or some of the following five stages:

- *Denial:* Denial is a common first response that adults experience because they need to believe in the stability of their lives.
- *Anger:* People experiencing anger want to lash out and blame someone for how they feel. They often appear irritable, aggressive, and uncooperative.
- *Bargaining:* In this stage, parents might believe they can save their relationship if they do certain things or make special promises. The bargaining stage allows people to feel they have some control over the situation. In the bargaining stage, parents can focus on hope and thereby delay facing sadness: 'If I do this or that, I can save our relationship.'
- *Depression:* Depression involves a great sense of loss and sadness upon realizing that nothing will stop the breakup. People need to acknowledge and express their feelings of loss and sadness. Denying or repressing these feelings only leads to them resurfacing in destructive ways. On the other hand, making room for these feelings decreases the intensity and duration.
  Acceptance: Acceptance means seeing the reality before you and moving beyond the feelings of loss. It begins when there is less depression, more resolution and stability, and people accept the divorce. Acceptance appears gradually and may take months or years to occur. When two people decide to go their separate ways, it is a major transition and a journey of growth. There are no absolute rules that determine how the process of healing will occur. Your ability to adapt will depend on a lot of factors. One thing is for sure: the sooner you begin to heal, the sooner your children will be on their road to recovery.

Case Study

Tom was going through a divorce that he initially wanted, but moving through the process proved more difficult than he anticipated. Karen, his soon to be ex-wife, was blaming Tom for wanting the divorce even though they had a very tumultuous 15-year marriage. Tom believed that deep down Karen wanted the divorce as well. He believed that it was just a matter of time before one of them filed, and it happened to be him. She now blamed him for moving the process along and being the first one to hire an attorney. Karen was making the initial stages of the process difficult, especially when it came to the couple's three children, Craig (8), Simon (7), and Ryan (5).

Most disturbing was Karen's telling the boys things like "Your Dad is divorcing me" and "This is all your Dad's fault." In situations like this, people like Karen are hurting, and most likely feeling a loss of control. As long as she and Tom were just in the talking stages of divorce, this was a safe zone for her. However, when Tom actually moved the process along, there was an initial period of imbalance and Karen was experiencing the after affects of this. Tom, to his credit, understood this, but at the same time could not stand idly by as Karen made disparaging statements to the children about him. His primary strategy for getting Karen to stop making such statements consisted of threatening her with financial

consequences. This tended to make matters worse. Tom could see no other way to get her to stop because in his words, “All she cares about is money.”

I encouraged Tom to take a different tack with Karen. The next time she said something blaming of him to the kids he should do nothing. Then, later that evening, he was to call her on the phone and say the following, “I know you love our kids and want the best for them, as I do. I know that your blaming me to them is helpful to you right now but when you are ready to discuss other ways of mentioning the divorce with the kids, let me know.” He was to say this without any malice or sarcasm. I coached him that this should be his mantra whenever she said something disparaging about him to the kids. I realized that this is easier said than done, but whenever a client can pull this off, it usually brings great results.

A week later at our next counseling session, Tom said he fell back into his old pattern of threatening Karen on at least 2 occasions. However, he was able to remember the intervention and tried it on another occasion with very positive results. First, he said that it felt much more empowering to him than the threats. Secondly, he said that it took Karen off guard, almost like she didn’t know how to respond. This is a common occurrence when somebody is working hard to break a destructive pattern. Tom was pleased with the results and was inspired to continue doing it.

Consequently, he noticed an extreme reduction in how often Karen said disparaging things to the children about him. We had 2 more counseling sessions where we focused on other issues relating to his adjustment to the divorce process. During our last session, he said that Karen had completely stopped all negative comments and he was pleasantly surprised that they could have much more productive conversations.

It is very common for one parent to have to take the high road for a time while the other parent is still adjusting. The last thing you want to do is get sucked into tit-for-tat or immature conversations that are ultimately harmful to both. If you can recognize that your partner is struggling with some aspect of the transition, it can be helpful if you take that into consideration and adjust your responses in a way that will be helpful to them making a healthier transition.