

contributes to poor mental health outcomes, especially when combined with child abuse. Parental psychopathology may be one possible mechanism to explain the relationships between child abuse, parental divorce, and psychiatric disorders and suicide attempts (Afifi, Boman, Fleisher, et al, 2009). Even when a divorce is amicable and open, children recall parental separation with the same emotions felt by victims of a natural disaster: loss, grief, and vulnerability to forces beyond their control.

The impact of divorce on children depends on several factors, including the age and sex of the children, the outcome of the divorce, and the quality of the parent-child relationship and parental care during the years following the divorce. Family characteristics are more crucial to the child's well-being than specific child characteristics, such as age or sex. High levels of ongoing family conflict are related to problems of social development, emotional stability, and cognitive skills for the child (see [Research Focus](#) box).

Research Focus

Impact of Divorce

Children who reported that their divorced parents were cooperative had better relationships with their parents, grandparents, stepparents, and siblings (Ahrons, 2007). Complications associated with divorce include efforts on the part of one parent to subvert the child's loyalties to the other, abandonment to other caregivers, and adjustment to a stepparent.

A major problem occurs when children are “caught in the middle” between the divorced parents. They become the message bearer between the parents, are often quizzed about the other parent's activities, and have to listen to one parent criticize the other. A nurse may be able to help the child get out of the middle by stating “I messages” based on the formula of “I feel (state the feeling) when you (state the source). I would like it if you...” An example of an “I message” is: “I do not feel comfortable when you ask me questions about mom; maybe you could ask her yourself.” This approach enables the child to feel in control.