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### When is the best time to get divorced, in order to inflict minimal damage on your children?



**P**arenting advice seems to change with the seasons. Use a naughty step; use positive reinforcement. Don't raise your voice; but make sure you're firm. Allow your child freedom; but always know what they're doing.

Making the "right" decisions for your children, which won't cause them long-term emotional harm, can feel like an impossible task. This is particularly so when it comes to divorce, something which around 90,000 opposite-sex couples do every year in the UK.

In a study released today, researchers found that children whose parents split before the kids six years old were at greater risk of being bullied, feeling lonely and being unhappy at school.

The Aarhus University study revealed that, in general, five per cent of children were lonely, bullied, or struggled with school. That rose by 41 per cent for those who came from separated families.

These findings conflict with previous reports. In the first major study to assess the emotional impact of splitting up on children, scientists at University College London found earlier this year that the greatest risk of divorce repercussions, such as bad behaviour and disobedience, come if the separation comes in late childhood or early adolescence.

But is there a "perfect age" to separate? What can parents do to minimise harm to their children during divorce? We've spoken to a child psychiatrist and a specialist divorce lawyer to put together a guide for parents.

#### Communication

The age of a child is not the most important factor when assessing the impact, according to Dr Louise Theodosiou, of the child and adolescent faculty at the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

“I think that parental separation has an impact at any age, but what parents have to recognise is that if parents are living together and they’re very unhappy and they are arguing a lot and avoiding each other then that’s very difficult for children, too,” Dr Theodosiou says.

One in eight children in the UK has a mental health disorder, according to a 2018 NHS report, and these are higher among children from households with “less healthy family functioning”.

“That’s a really important phrase,” says Dr Theodosiou, “If you’re living with parents who...are very distressed and very anxious, that could be impacting on (children’s) mental health, too.”

Communicating what is going on to your children during a separation, in an age-appropriate way, will help them to understand the situation, she says. “It’s about really communicating with the child and making sure the child still has space to talk.”

Whether your children are six or 16, instability in a family situation will be unsettling, so it is important that they are kept informed so they can understand the changes. The importance of communication was also highlighted by Charles Hale QC, a barrister at 4PB, who specialises in divorce mitigation. “They are much more likely to recover more quickly than those who are kept in the dark and do not know what’s going on and are treated as separate to the family difficulty,” he says.

## Cooperation

This may seem like the most obvious need, but it can be difficult to accomplish. When going through a divorce it is crucial to continue to cooperate as parents regardless of what is going on in your personal relationship.

Hale says this is the “golden truth” when it comes to separation. “When parents divorce, if they are able to separate their reasons for their separation and animosity from their ability to parent, then the children will adjust and will cope, it doesn’t matter whether they are one, two, six, or 14,” he says. Children are “resilient” and if separated parents are able to cooperate, this minimises the chances of causing emotional damage.

Dr Theodosiou notes that it’s important for parents not to be critical of each other in front of children, as the child could be grieving the loss of one parent leaving the family home. “Try to keep things separate,” she says.

## Give children a voice

Allowing your child to be part of the discussion and voicing their opinions and feelings will help them to rationalise the situation.

“If they’re angry with one parent, or if they’re angry with both parents, or if they’re not angry with either and they understand, it’s fine,” says Hale. “They have a central role in ensuring their own emotional recovery, too, and that’s very much with talking it out.”

But, he adds this does not mean the child should be involved in the decision making process, as this can make them “vulnerable to choosing sides”. They should not be put in a position where their decision can help or hinder one parent over the other, Hale says.

Dr Theodosiou suggests that, with the child’s consent, you could inform the school of your home situation. They may have a school nurse or counsellor who your child can talk to. This may be easier for them, as they may not want to upset either parent.

## Consistency

Though family life may have been turned upside down, it’s important to try and keep consistency, Dr Theodosiou says.

One parent may no longer live at the family home, or not spend as much time with the children, for example, but keeping a routine is vital. “Getting them to school, eating a meal in the evening so they have the opportunity to talk, making sure you’re still spending one-on-one time,” are all ways to remain stability, she says.

Another way to maintain life balance is to keep up an activity your child does outside the home, such as a sport. “I saw a child whose father had left quite suddenly and this particular child had a sports teacher who was very supportive of him,” Dr Theodosiou explained. “His parent, who he continues to live with, really supported him in doing that activity, too.”

Though she notes the financial strain of divorce can make keeping up with these activities hard, if a child has the chance to continue to excel it will help them to cope.

## When to seek help

It can be hard to know when to look for professional help when it comes to mental health needs, but Dr Theodosiou has provided a list of warning signs, which may indicate your child could benefit from speaking to a professional.

“One of the key things to look for is changes in a child’s behaviour,” she says. “If you’ve got a child who is very interested in their appearance and they start to not look after themselves as well as they had before, or they are more tearful or behaving like a younger child...(it could) indicate distress.”

Other signs to look out for:

- ① Arguing with siblings in a way they haven’t done before
- ② Withdrawing into their room
- ③ Eating less, avoiding meals or weight loss
- ④ Being less sociable

- 5 Less communicative
- 6 Decreased motivation
- 7 Struggling to sleep

Dr Theodosiou says parents should also be aware of their own mental health and coping mechanisms, as these, too, can impact upon children. “When parents are distressed they may not always be making the right decisions or using the right coping strategies,” she explains.

Picking up coping mechanisms like smoking or drinking could cause your child to worry about you. Many children are aware of the health effects of smoking, Dr Theodosiou says, so you should be aware of the distress you could be adding to your child.

### **Use of language**

In the last few years the language and terminology around family separation has changed. Words like residence, contact and custody are no longer used, they were “pejorative terms”, according to Hale, and framed the child as a possession belonging to one parent.

“They are not possessions,” he says, and to children’s benefit language is now framed around “living with” and “sharing”. This puts both parents on equal footing in the eyes of the child, he says. “(It) is extremely important if children are to understand that it’s okay to be with one parent on one day, and okay to be with another parent on another,” he says.

### **The role of the solicitors**

Legal representatives also have a part to play in ensuring minimal damage is done to children, Hale says. The client’s interests are always going to be central to lawyers, which are often that they want more time with their children, but Hale says it is possible to “take a slightly different line” and advise them to tread with caution. In the past clients have come back to Hale and thanked him for advising them to “take a step back”, he said. “As children grow older and get into teenage years, if they believe they have been kept away from one parent by the other that’s where that parent has real difficulties,” Hale warned.