

Title: DIVORCE IN THE CLASSROOM: WHEN DOES MY CHILD NEED SPECIAL EDUCATION?

Author: Jessica St. Clair, M.F.T.

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Children exposed to divorce are twice as likely to repeat a grade and five times likelier to be expelled or suspended from school, according to the article "Divorce's Toll on Children" by Karl Zinsmeister. In the early months after a divorce, young children especially, are less imaginative, more repetitive and passive watchers. They tend to be more dependent, demanding, unaffectionate and disobedient than children from intact families. They are more afraid of abandonment, loss of love and bodily harm. They carry these problems to school.

John Guidubaldi and Joseph Perry found in their survey of 700 youngsters that intact families on 9 of 30 mental health measures, show among other things, more withdrawal, dependency and inattention, and unhappiness, and less work effort. Divorced students were more likely to abuse drugs, to commit violent acts, to take their own life and to bear children out of wedlock. School personnel have their hands full trying to deal with the psychological and social issues of divorce in the classroom.

According to the National Survey of Children, 15 percent of children living with their mothers without contact with fathers were booted out of school. In Judith Wallerstein's study of the effects of divorce on children, of the middle class sample, 13% of the children had dropped out of school all together. Barely half of Wallersteins' subjects went to college, far less than the 85% average for students in their high schools. Sadly, she concludes that 60% of the divorce children in her study will fail to match the educational achievements of their fathers.

These alarming statistics underscore the seriousness of the behavioral effects of divorce on our children. More importantly, a child who has learning difficulties and who has been surviving at school without proper identification and services will deteriorate quickly when divorce destroys his world. What teachers and professionals might label as his reaction to the loss of family, may in fact be a glimpse at the true nature of his learning delays and special needs. More than one child has gone undiagnosed for more than a year because the effects of divorce that masked the brewing disaster of dyslexia and a learning processing delay. Unidentified and unassisted, these children are further devastated by divorce and become the next candidates for continuation school and drop out status.

Psycho-educational testing conducted by the school psychologist at parent's request will assist educators and parents in determining the nature of a child's difficulties in school. Remember, the standard for extra services for a certain group of special education students is that their achievement is well below their ability. To put it another way, otherwise smart kids (at about average intelligence and above) are not cutting the mustard. They become inattentive and uncooperative when overwhelmed at school, therefore, don't be too quick to blame avoidance and belligerence just on the divorce. Also children who withdraw could need special services just as much as the disruptive students. Children, like adults, handle stress in different ways.

If your child is having difficulties learning, consult with the school psychologist and get information about your rights from the state and federal government. Obtaining proper placement for your child is difficult and time consuming but well worth the effort. If you are not satisfied with the school assessment, request a reassessment by an outside source. Work with the school and district until your child is properly placed. Above all, do not confuse divorce issues with learning disabilities. Help your child with counseling and proper academic placement. Ask your school for counseling referrals, if necessary. Take the lead in planning your child's education. Except for maybe their other parent, no one else will be as motivated as you are.

Jessica St. Clair, M.F.T., is a Marriage, Family and Child Counselor with over twenty years experience working with families and children. She is a therapist, credentialed teacher and qualified child custody evaluator. Jessica has worked with hundreds of families to prepare them for custody evaluations as ordered by the Court. Jessica is a woman of great empathy and has helped many children cope with the turmoil divorce creates in their lives. Jessica practices in Newport Beach and Santa Ana, Ca. She is the leader of Planet Divorce and Parenting Wizards, both joint projects of Divorce Wizards, Inc. and Child Custody Consultants. You may reach Jessica St. Clair at 714-568-1111 or www.childcustodyconsultant.com.