Signs of stress

Divorce tough on kids, too—prof

The stress on parents undergoing di-vorce often blinds them to the signs of stress in their children, according to a Michigan State University professor. "When parents are on that slide toward divorce, constant tension tends to drive them inward so they some-times become insulated from their chil-dren's problems," says Anne Soderman, assistant professor of family and child ecology.

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Soderman says children typically conceal their stress. But alert, earing parents can interpret the signals.

"Really young kids are firmly attached to their parents," she explains, "so they quickly develop a fear of being abandoned. The mother might tell the child, 'Daddy and I don't love each other any more so we're going to live upart,' but the child might think, 'If she can leave daddy, she can leave me, too."

YOUNGER CHILDREN, Soderman notes, experience a "depressive reaction" which they often manifest through regressive behavior. "A child who hasn't wet the bed in a long time wets the bed. One suddenly wants a bottle even though he's given it up. They watch a lot of TV, lose interest in their toys and start hanging around the house to be wherever the parent is."

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middle childhood (roughly ages 6-12) are sadness and guilt. They wonder why they can't keep their parents to gether and often feel it's their fault that their parents are breaking up," she

any their parents are breaking up, she says.

Another reaction is anxiety about having to move away, leave their friends, change schools. "It's different for younger kids because they don't really care where they live as long as it's with their parents," Soderman explains.

ADOLESCENTS. she says, think more about the future — what they'll have to do to get money, how they'll go to college, whether or not they too will end up divorced.

A further problem occurs when parents who have separated begin working out their hostillities by manipulating the children.

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A lot of parents can make the break legally but not psychologically," says Soderman. They're angry, bitter, burt and they play pain games' with their ex-spouses, using the kids to spy on and manipulate one another.

For example, the wife says, 'You didn't send the alimony check this week so when you come to pick up our son this weekend, forget it, he won't be ready."

After a while, the children learn to manipulate the parents, too.

They see they can satisfy some of their own needs by using the parents the way the parents use them, "Soderman says. They'll say, Mom, I like going to dad's better. I get to stay up, later, go to movies, and I don't have to do housework. It's more fun there, and he doesn't yell at me the way you do."

TO AVOID this, parents should present a united front," Soderman advises.

of behavior themselves before they can stop the kids from doing it. They have to learn to support one another when talking to the children, avoid bad-mouthing each other and apply similar rules at both residences. The children usually want to be with both their parents, so parents shouldn't force them to take sides. The loyalty conflicts are very painful for children, Soderman says.

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