



STRESS AND THE BRAIN IN CHILDREN OF DIVORCE:

Page 1 of 4

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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What is Stress?

Last week we discussed what was happening in the brains of children that are fearful or scared. This week let's expand that concept and add what is happening in the brains of children that are stressed.

Stress is the body's way of reacting to challenging events, one of which for children is the divorce of their parents. Stress in children can affect them physically, emotionally and mentally.

Stress and the Child of Divorce

Children of divorce have all kinds of stressors including not knowing:

- Not knowing where the other parent is
- Not knowing who is picking them up after school
- Not knowing where they will spend holidays
- How to handle birthdays
- How to handle new relationships
- How to handle losing friends, pets, holidays, etc.



All of these stressors leave children of divorce overwhelmed and unable to cope with life.

Children of divorce will experience many stressful moments and, for some, many stressful years after their parents' divorce. Every time a child has to change homes, it can be stressful. Every time a child hears one parent talking to the other parent in "that tone of voice", it will produce stress. Hearing the words, lawyer, court, child custody and child support can cause stress to the child.

Stress Leads to Fear

Some stressful moments will strike fear into the child of divorce. We learned [last week](#) that when a child feels fear, their brains revert to the lower level of the brain or the brain stem. The brainstem is the lower extension of the brain where it connects to the spinal cord. Neurological functions located in the brainstem include those necessary for survival (breathing, digestion, heart rate, blood pressure) and for arousal (being awake and alert).





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Page 2 of 4

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The immediate response to a perceived threat is for the body to channel resources for strength and speed. The brain dulls the body's sense of pain. The brain's responsibility is for safety. The heart rate speeds up, the pulse begins to race and this sends extra blood to the muscles and organs. Blood vessels open wider to allow more blood flow to large muscles groups.

Other body parts affected include:

- Blood rushes to the large muscles in the legs, making the hands colder and preparing the body to flee.
- The pupils of your eyes dilate for better vision.
- Lungs take in more oxygen (many children of divorce experience more asthma attacks).
- The bloodstream brings extra oxygen and glucose-fuel to the heart for power. Heart rate and blood pressure rise.
- The Adrenal glands secrete the fight-or-flight hormone epinephrine (adrenaline)
- Digestion halts allowing the body to dedicate energy to the muscles (stomach aches are a constant complaint in children of divorce).
- Sweat is produced to keep the body cool

It's All About the Child's Perception

It's important to realize that a "perceived threat" to a child is a threat. It doesn't make any difference if there really isn't a threat, because it is the child's perception of a threat that counts. Their perceptions aren't lies –they are the child's perception.

Ever hear a mom say to a child,

"That's not what happened. Stop telling those lies."

To a child, it may very well be what happened because it is their perception. This is particularly true in children of divorce. Remember they may not have their parents talking to each other, to them or explaining things to them, so their perceptions of events can get very wild and out of control in their minds.

TIPS FOR DEALING WITH SCARED CHILDREN

- ✓ One thing to remember is that not all children that run away are scared or in the lower levels of the brain. They may have used running away to get their way from the parent and it's been working for them. You'll be able to tell right away because the child that runs away because it's a habit will be laughing or defiant and yelling.
- ✓ Another tip, when toddlers and preschoolers are scared, they will turn the situation into one of game playing. They will run away laughing. The best way to deal with this is to play it through; get their attention: then move forward.





STRESS AND THE BRAIN IN CHILDREN OF DIVORCE:

Page 3 of 4

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The Impacts of Stress

All these changes help a person's body react quickly and efficiently to the perceived threat. This stress response is known as the fight or flight response in the brain. The fight or flight response is critical in emergency situations. In other situations such as taking a test, performing or giving a speech a milder form of this stress response is activated. Some milder forms of stress keeps us alert and can cause us to do well in different situations. The brain's response quickly returns to normal once we are through the event.

It is when we live in a constant state of alertness or chronic stress for long periods of time that we can be adversely affected. Unfortunately, children of divorce live in chronic stress and constant fear about what is happening for years. Even low levels of stress can be hard on people if they last for long periods of time. Chronic stress can harm the immune system, the brain and the heart and can be related to various illnesses.

Chronic stress can also cause the adrenal gland to release cortisol. Over long periods of time, cortisol becomes toxic to brain cells, possibly damaging cognitive ability. Cortisol can even kill brain cells. Depression may also increase, and anger and fatigue may increase. Blood pressure may become elevated and the heart rate faster, causing damage to blood vessels.

Signs of Stress

Signs of poorly managed stress or stress overload include:

- Inability to concentrate
- Poor memory
- Low level of creativity
- Flushed face
- Cold hands
- Rapid shallow breathing
- Disorganization, you can't find anything
- Time management – can't estimate time
- Every task become overwhelming
- Empathy – everything is about you
- No impulse control – you react
- Poor motor coordination
- Shortness of breath
- Dry mouth
- Acid stomach
- Gas, diarrhea
- Frequent urination





STRESS AND THE BRAIN IN CHILDREN OF DIVORCE:

Page 4 of 4

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- Palpitations
- Irritability
- Overindulging

Next week we will look at practical ways to help stressed out children.

Additional Resources

- ✓ Dr. Becky Bailey, *Conscious Discipline* (Loving Guidance, Inc. www.ConsciousDiscipline.com)
- ✓ Bruce Perry, several articles and books on trauma, <http://www.childtrauma.org/>
- ✓ Kathy Nunley, *A Student's Brain: The Parent/Teacher Manual* (Morris Publishing) <http://brains.org>
- ✓ Pam Schiller, *Start Smart* (Gryphon House) <http://pamschiller.com/>
- ✓ Joseph Ledoux, "Searching the Brain for the Roots of Fear" article in Online Commentary from The Times, <http://tinyurl.com/6pmvxtr>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda's website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\)](http://www.hlp4.com) [<http://www.hlp4.com>]. Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at Linda@hlp4.com.

