Frames: A Children's Bibliotherapeutic Tool for Opening Conversations About Divorce

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Frames:

A children’s bibliotherapeutic tool for opening conversations about divorce

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Abstract

When parents divorce, their children must navigate through their emotions and learn how to cope with the changes and instability that may occur. Although many families undergo divorce, the experience is unique and individualized for each person involved. Picture books are available to young children as resources for support; however, many tell the same story of divorce. This independent study offers a new resource for children experiencing divorce in the form of a wordless picture book, entitled Frames, so that children can openly discuss their personal understanding of divorce rather than being presented with someone else’s story. Additionally, the study includes a rationale for the writing of Frames, research on the intended early childhood audience, reviews of picture books currently available regarding divorce, the original material, feedback from child professionals, instructions on how educators and professionals can use Frames to support children, and a guide for parents to aid them in supporting their children through divorce with the assistance of Frames.
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Rationale

Personal Experience

If it is estimated that one-third of marriages end in divorce, how many children are left wondering why, how, and what changes will ensue to their once harmonious family unit (Miller, 2014)? Divorce creates confusion for children of all ages. Siegler, Deloache, and Eisenberg (2011) state, “Younger children may have more trouble understanding the causes and consequences of divorce. They are especially more likely to be anxious about abandonment by their parents and to blame themselves for the divorce” (p. 487). Parents may be consumed in conflict and/or preoccupied with their own changes while their children may be left feeling helpless. Some children may have an outlet or support system to attempt to better understand what is happening or to cope; however, many are left to fend on their own. If a child is referred to a therapist, school counselor, or support group, he or she may not be comfortable speaking or know how to start the conversation. Children of divorce need to feel safe to express what they are going through and have resources to help them share these thoughts, feelings, and emotions through tools such as books.

I consider myself to be one of the lucky ones. My parents divorced when I was two. I have one memory of them together in our old kitchen. I was picked up and sat on the counter. My parents pretended to pull me apart as we giggled over who loves me more. From times that I can best remember, or from what I can recollect, my parents were amicable after the divorce. They still enjoyed classic rock concerts together, we all celebrated my sister’s and my birthdays together, and both parents were present for school events. My mom and dad remarried in the same year to spouses that cared deeply
for my sister and me. All four of my parents worked together to put the needs of the children first.

However, even in the most cordial divorce scenarios, such as my parents, children have concerns. My father lived 40 minutes away. I saw him twice a week and cherished our time together. We occasionally had sleepovers and traveled to the Poconos, New Jersey, and Florida on vacation. Still, at times, I wanted more from my father. I remember one evening I was in tears as my father dropped me at home after having dinner. I did not want to say goodbye. My friends never had to say goodbye to their fathers. Their fathers were home every night to tuck them into bed. I, however, had to memorize my father’s cell phone number, with a different area code, to call him when I needed him.

Questions were constantly running through my mind. Would my dad know my friends? Would my friends’ parents allow play dates in my dad’s house given that it was 30 minutes away? Would my dad know my favorite flavor of Snapple? Would my mom change her last name making it different than mine? How can I love my dad and not make my stepdad feel left out? If I missed my dad, would my mom feel that I did not love her? What if I could no longer remember my parents together? I was left feeling alone and confused, as do many children of divorce (Siegler et al., 2011).

Luckily I was independent at a young age and was proactive about finding coping mechanisms. I spoke to everyone about my parents: friends, teachers, and other family members. In the second grade, I asked my teacher if my spelling word for the week could be ‘biological’. I became an expert on my family. I scheduled times together and apart. I was free to feel and express my understanding of the divorce and my new family dynamics because my parents kept the needs of my sister and me as their top priority. I
recall when I cried at my dad’s wedding when it was time to smile together for family pictures and my step-mom was never angry that I distracted from her special day. Although my family would be labeled by some as “broken,” I always felt fortunate to have such a large, loving family. I understood at an early age that even some families that were ‘intact’ were not able to feel the love that I had felt.

In middle school my teachers told me that I must participate in a program called “Banana Splits”. According to their website (http://www.bananasplitsresourcecenter.org), Banana Splits provides activities to help children learn to cope and manage the daily stress of divorce through working with a supportive community (Raymond, n.d.). From my understanding at the time, a small group of children with divorced parents were pulled out of class once a week to sit in a room with a stranger to talk about our parents for approximately one hour. At the end of the program, you were gifted with a banana split party; however, I still do not believe it is appropriate to give children an ice cream party just because their parents are divorced. During the meetings I watched awkwardly as my peers hesitated to speak openly. I shared how my parents went to a concert the night before or how my dad recently took me to Adventure Land. I felt no reason for me to be involved in this group and had trouble relating to my peers. Furthermore, I felt that there should be no expectations for how one should feel about their divorce experience. Divorce is so individualized for each family. At Banana Splits I was under the impression that I was supposed to be suffering or depressed about my family. No one can tell you how to feel or how to internalize family changes. Everyone needs guidance in finding a coping mechanism; however, Banana Splits was not beneficial for me considering my parents had learned to cooperate after being divorced for eight years.
In kindergarten, I created picture books in an attempt to make meaning of what had happened between my parents and in my house as a child. I wrote fantasy stories about being ill as an infant and both of my parents present taking care of me in our original home together. I wrote about the clown face on the door to my bedroom I shared with my sister. At five-years-old, I tried to piece together memories I thought I had or that I would have liked to remember. My most valuable illustrative experience was a wordless picture book involving picture frames. I related my parents’ divorce to a broken picture frame. When a picture frame breaks, you replace it. My family’s picture frame was different in the end with each of us in our own space, but we were still held together by love. Twenty years later at Bank Street College of Education, I wondered how my kindergarten understanding of divorce could be used as a tool for others.

Children’s books are opportunities for children to lose themselves in an experience. Whether the story be fact-based or story-based, children can relate to picture books through their universality and simplicity. Often children imagine themselves in the shoes of the protagonist as he or she flips through the pages. Later children can be seen acting out the adventures from a story in a dramatic play setting to make meaning of what they have experienced. “Through the metaphor of play, young clients are able to explore the meaning of their world and express this view using hands-on interventions with that world” (Chesley, Gillett, & Wagner, 2008, p. 400). Children’s books can help children to safely explore life (Pardeck, 1990). Situations that may have felt new or unsafe can be comfortably navigated through as the characters problem solve together with the reader along side for the journey.
Well-executed wordless picture books provide an additional source of exploration. Arif (2008) explains that reading a picture book,

…is an open-ended process in which viewers read stories by bringing their background experiences and personal histories to bear on the visual images they encounter within the text… [readers] assign meaning to these visual signs based on their own experiences, perspectives, and the particular context of the reading event (p. 121-122).

Children are able to take on the book as their own. After absorbing the illustrations many times over, the child is able to become the author. The child finds his or her own meaning and interprets the story using personal experience and open-ended creativity (Pardeck, 1990). Allowing a child to tell his or her own story provides an insight into the child’s mind. It allows an accompanying adult listener to peek into what the child may be making meaning of or internalizing in his or her own life. It may offer the accompanying reader a new means of gaining access to build understandings to the child’s perspective and provide support into an area the child has revealed he or she is still working to understand. Wordless picture books are an untapped resource for supporting children in areas that they are experiencing yet beyond their cognitive and/or verbal development.

The wordless picture book that I had initially created as a kindergartener and honed as a graduate student, Frames, is a therapeutic tool that provides a comfortable opening into conversations with children about their parents’ divorce. Divorce is individualized; no two experiences are the same. No single book or single expert can tell you how to feel or what paths to take. However, Frames is an opportunity for all children experiencing divorce to vocalize his or her own story with the support of illustrations.
Rosenblatt (1982) states that as storytellers, “We participate in the story, we identify with the characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings” (p. 270). My intent is to give children an opening to share their voice in the tumultuous experience that is divorce. I believe that if children were able to express themselves more efficiently, they would feel safer, supported, and better equipped to cope with life’s many challenges, specifically divorce of their parents. Frames is such a tool that provides support and comfort to children through the use of the illustrations to vocalize their feelings and cognitive understanding of divorce.

**Divorce Theory**

A child’s sense of self and relationships with others is founded in the nature of the parenting style by which they were raised. Regardless of the nature vs. nurture debate, children will form their attachment, personalities, and emotional expressivity, as they are influenced by their caregivers (Lutz, Hock, & Kang, 2007). Siegler et al. (2011) write, “The quality of children’s relationships with their parents seems to influence their sense of security and how they feel about themselves and other people” (p. 408). Pre-, during, and post divorce life can alter how parents treat their children and alter their children’s perception of their relationship with their parents. “Thus, stressful life experiences during and after divorce often undermine the quality of parenting and of family interactions, which affects children’s adjustments” (Siegler et al., 2011, p. 486).

While considering the numerous stress factors of divorce, we must look closely at the effects of divorce on both the parent and the child. Divorce causes a change in parenting styles, which manifests in parents no longer focusing solely on their child but
primarily on how divorce is affecting their lives independently from their child. The stressors of divorce may cause some parents to adopt a rejecting-neglecting parenting style in which they are consumed with their own needs over the needs of their children (Siegler et al., 2011). When parents are not focused on the child’s well-being, the child is left to find coping mechanisms independently, which is not an easy feat for young children at an age when they rely on their parents for role modeling and guidance. This lack of support from parents leads to negative behaviors of aggression or depression from the child. “If parents do not talk about emotions but express their feelings nonverbally, for example, their children may come to believe that it is not appropriate to discuss their feelings directly with others” (Siegler et al., 2011, p. 408). Parents must model for their children how to cope with stress or disappointment so that children are best able to express their emotions appropriately and thereby have healthy and open communication (Lutz et al., 2007).

The value of talk and communication is vital for children and adults experiencing life-changing events. Communication will help children better understand their emotions and help to make meaning of their world. Lutz et al. (2007) explain that emotional openness “…is a critical process for children who are learning to understand, interpret, and deal with stress that is beyond one’s control” (p. 93). Speaking openly with parents or professionals such as child psychologists about stressful events allows children to explore their emotions and develop healthy coping mechanisms. Learning to express oneself at an early age will lead to a continued positive and healthy grasp on one’s emotions. “Talking about feelings associated with traumatic or distressing events is linked to psychological well-being, improved functioning, better self-reported health, and
better immune responses” (Lutz et al., 2007, p. 86). It is crucial for children experiencing divorce to have an emotional outlet. Avoiding emotions and discussion is detrimental to a child’s development (Lutz et al., 2007). Children cannot be expected to know how to start open communication on their own when their parents are not modeling for them. Using a therapeutic tool such as Frames can encourage a dialogue with children to allow them to express how they are truly feeling and how they are coping with stressful events such as divorce.

Symbolic therapies, which take various forms such as play therapy, art therapy, and bibliotherapy, are services provided to children to enable them to express their thoughts and feelings about difficult events in a comfortable and familiar setting through the use of metaphors. Chesley et al. (2008) describe the three major benefits of symbolic therapies, “First, it helps them gain an understanding of their experiences…Second, through symbolic play, children are able to express and deal with their emotions in a nonthreatening way…Third, children an gain a sense of perceived control through symbolic play” (p. 400). These types of therapies are especially helpful for children who are not comfortable speaking openly about or ready to confront their problems. The term “bibliotherapy” is used to describe the utilization of literature as a therapeutic tool to encourage expression (Chesley et al., 2008; Pardeck, 1990).

One tool that is especially supportive in allowing children to express their emotions is bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy allows children to “express their view of themselves, their view of others, their anxieties and conflicts, and their way of conceptualizing and solving problems in the world” in developmentally appropriate ways (Chesley et al., 2008, p. 400-401; Pardeck, 1993). During bibliotheraphy, children often
read books along side counselors and together they work to interpret the meaning of stories, find connections between the plot and the child’s life, and uncover the lesson in the tale. It is easier for children to address the issues of a fictional character, separated from the child’s own experience than to make the same claims about themselves (Chesley et al., 2008). With the use of metaphor, children are able to problem solve for the characters, and through conversations the counselor can help interpret the personal meaning for the child’s life.

Pardeck (1991) created a three-step model of bibliotherapy: identification, catharsis, and insight. The “identification stage” involves the counselor selecting a developmentally appropriate book relating to the child’s needs. The “cathartic stage” is when the child may express emotions relating to the story. For example, the child may feel sorry for the character or angry at the occurring events. Lastly, in the “insight stage,” the child and counselor together interpret the meaning of the story and discuss problem solving and the solution. Pardeck (1993) notes that younger children would benefit from using mediums other than dialogue to express their understanding of life events through the metaphors provided in the story. Children may enjoy drawing, using puppets, making collages, or other activities to express the personal connections in the story and how the issues were resolved. Frames, as a resource for bibliotherapy, would allow children to experience Pardeck’s (1991) three steps and express their thoughts and feelings related to divorce with the comfortable use of metaphor.
Child Development

A tool such as Frames is intended for a reader in early to middle elementary years. This time period is when children begin to reflect and express their thinking and feelings about various topics in school and at home. Children who are six-years-old may be able to interpret Frames though the ability to interpret metaphors increases with age (Chesley et al., 2008). When looking at books, “Sixes can begin to see another’s point of view,” (Wood, 2007, p. 76). Additionally, they enjoy explaining their “thoughts and feelings about a story” (Wood, 2007, p. 82). This abstract thinking and expression is crucial in order for children to be able to provide narration to Frames. Readers should be able to identify with the protagonist as they see her parents’ separation through the illustrations of the story and then be able to convey the sequence of events to a listener.

Seven is when children would most benefit from an emotional outlet or resource to encourage communication as they are becoming introverted thinkers. At seven, children “show increasing interest in the world around them. This interest will expand through ages eight, nine, and ten, and children will begin to identify areas of personal enjoyment and concern” (Wood, 2007, p. 89). Seven-year-olds’ capability to observe and comprehend, results in the growth of their worries and fears. Children have “…the fear that, in the face of quarrels and conflict within the family, home might not remain stable and solid” (Cohen, 1972, p. 297). Seven-year-olds require outside reassurance from adults that they are secure and safe. When a divorce occurs, that security is shaken and children need some kind of stability they can hold on to. Routine and constant communication with adults and peers can help children feel that they have some steadiness and control to help combat their worries and uncertainty.
At eight-years-old, children revive their desire to be open and share with others. They “like to talk, explain ideas, and use rapidly expanding vocabularies” (Wood, 2007, p. 100). When reading, they enjoy showing their understanding to others by explaining their comprehension of stories. This is the very skill necessary for Frames to be a successful therapeutic tool. Children at this age are more comfortable with change and find ways to cope with disappointment. Eight-year-olds, however, have a strong preoccupation with fairness. Divorce is often described by children as being unfair as they wonder, “Why my family?” Providing children with a counter-narrative that divorce is not just in their family could be helpful. Children at eight may benefit from speaking with peers that are also experiencing divorce and can brainstorm coping mechanisms together so that they do not feel alone. Cohen (1972) writes that children of this age need “…opportunity for the brainstorming that sparks new thinking, or for the satisfaction of peer-group sharing” (p. 159).

The concern with fairness continues at age nine for a child, “…who is struggling with the cognitive task of understanding ethical behavior at a new level” (Wood, 2007, p. 108). Worry returns with more intensity due to the more advanced comprehension of nines. They can observe and understand the bigger issues of their world. Nines look for explanations behind their troubles. Wood (2007) states that nine-year-olds are “reading to learn, instead of learning to read” (p. 113). Children at age nine are looking to find information. Frames is a crucial tool for nines because it can model the experience of divorce for children to read and wrestle with its meaning. Frames does not provide answers, but it does provide an outlet for making meaning in a safe space. At nine, children may even be inspired to write about their family’s divorce. Frames may be a
mentor text for such a writing activity.

Finally, at ten, children are ready to investigate areas of problem solving. They may be able to do this with peers or internally. Wood (2007) writes, “…ten is a good age for learning peer mediation and conflict resolution” (p. 127). Children can continue to work together to help each other cope and survive divorce. Again at ten, children are interested in verbalizing their understanding. If children at ten still need encouragement to communicate their thoughts and feelings, Frames continues to be that door for comfortable expression.
Literature Review

This review examines ten picture books that focus on divorce and are appropriate for elementary school age children. All of the stories selected are exemplar selections for parents, educators, and counselors to read with children who are experiencing divorce. The reviews discuss for whom the book should be read with and in what settings the book should be explored, whether it be read aloud in a class, one-on-one at home, or shared with a counselor. The books are separated into three sections: family diversity, home life, and mid-divorce. The theme of family diversity is chosen because all of the books include divorce as well as other family formations. These books are great selections for class read alouds to inform children of the many special types of families. Home life was chosen as a section because a large focus of divorce for the child is where he or she will be living. Many books revolve around the concept of a child living in two homes after their parents’ divorce. Mid-divorce books highlight the struggles and emotions a child will face in the midst of their parents’ divorce. These books may be most beneficial in bibliotherapy because mid-divorce books address the difficult nature of divorce that children need help discussing with a supportive adult. Lastly, Frames will be included in this review in the mid-divorce section. This final review also discusses how Frames fills a void in the genre of picture books on divorce. It is abundantly clear is that every book in this review stresses the importance of continuing to show love for the child experiencing divorce. Families may change but love does not.
Family Diversity

All Families are Special by Norma Simon (Ages 4-8)


Mrs. Mack shares with her elementary school class that she is going to become a grandmother and invites the class to share why their families are special. Her students take turns describing their unique families and discuss dynamics that include adoption, extended families with ten people, families of two due to the death of the mother, two mommies, traveling parents, stepdads and not knowing the biological father, twins, ill grandparents, international families, pets and pets who have died, children who live with grandparents instead of parents, parents the child does not see very often, divorced families, stepsiblings, and more. After the children discussed the people in their families, Mrs. Mack explained, “Part of living in a family is sharing happy times and sad times.”

The children were invited to share examples of both good things and unhappy circumstances. Children raised their hands and shared experiences of serious illness, losing a job, arguing, and divorce, specifically children feeling caught in between parents. They also shared times of seeing grandparents and cousins, taking pictures, family picnics, sending e-mails, visiting relatives, building a tree house, and getting together on holidays. “When there are bad times, families help each other to feel better. When there are good times, families enjoy them together.” All families are different and all families are special.

The colored-pencil illustrations in this book are vibrant and colorful allowing family dynamics to be shown in a positive light and full of love. All families are enjoying
their time together. Additionally, the families are diverse. The families depicted are white, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern. The diversity in race and family dynamic allows all children to find someone they can relate to in this story.

The message in this book is written clearly on the first page. Families have changed in the last few decades. There is no longer the “typical” dynamic. What is important is to love and value the family we have. Children must be brought up in loving and caring families. In a note to families, Simon (2003) wrote,

Kinships plays a significant role in shaping the personality and self-image of every child in a family. The strengths children develop and the successes they experience within their families shape the strengths and expectations of success they carry with them as they grow up and move out into the world. The family environment influences how children thrive and mature; eventually it influences their ability to form happy families of their own.

Families learn to love and grow together to support each other through life’s many challenges and rewards. All Families Are Special allows children to identify their family dynamic and appreciate its unique qualities as well as appreciate other dynamics. This book is crucial for every early childhood classroom to strengthen family pride and promote an appreciation of differences from family to family.

The Family Book by Todd Parr (Ages 3-5)


Todd Parr uses simple text and colorful illustrations to show that although families may be different, they all include love. This book discusses concepts such as
family size, skin tone, location, appearance, parent dynamic, habits, and home life. As he shares the unique qualities of families, he also unites families with liking hugs, sharing sadness, celebrating special days, and supporting each other. He leaves the reader with one last message, “There are lots of different ways to be a family. Your family is special no matter what kind it is.”

Children have a lot to learn and relate to in this book. Todd Parr starts each sentence with, “Some families…” to allow for variation. No two families are the same, and that is okay. This is an important message for young children to understand so that they can grow to appreciate their families and become accepting of other family dynamics. As with many Todd Parr books, the illustrations are childlike and bright. The style of drawing is effortless for children to interpret because of its simplicity. The vibrant color scheme grabs the attention of the young child reader and promotes feelings of joy. Todd Parr also uses his creative expertise to select the type of characters to pair with the text. When the text reads, “Some families are different colors,” Parr draws a colorful family of fish instead of illustrating humans. This allows all readers to feel a connection to the book because the illustrations do not depict one type of family or attribute. Teachers and parents can read this book aloud to a class to promote awareness and acceptance of different family types. Teachers can also read this book with a focus on valuing what makes each family unique.

*Who’s in a Family?* by Robert Skutch (Ages 3-5)

There are many ways to make a family. Families are not only for people but for animals, as well. Families can be made up of any number of children or pets. There are also different ways to define ‘parent’. Some families have one or two parents, some families have stepparents, and some families are raised by grandparents. This book shares some special moments that a variety of families share. Animals also have multiple dynamics for families. Monkeys, elephants, lions, and puppies raise their children in special ways. Just like children and their parents, animal children may also look differently from their parents. When asking, “Who’s in a family?” the answer found in this book is, “The people who love you most!”

Who’s in a Family? introduces children to a variety of possible family dynamics. It shows children that have a unique family structure is something to value. The book succinctly states on the back cover, “Chances are, your family is like no one else’s—and that’s just fine.” Readers can find themselves in the families presented and learn about other families, including families in the animal kingdom. Additionally, this book incorporates diversity in its illustrations as it demonstrates diversity in families. The families incorporate cultures from all over the world. This gives the book a sense of universality for the readers to physically see themselves in the story. Who’s in a Family? could be used as a read aloud in early childhood classrooms. Children will learn about family diversity and identify with families like their own in this story. Similar to All Families are Special and The Family Book, Who’s in a Family is a comfortable and safe-feeling introduction to family diversity that can lead a class to having more in-depth discussions about the world around them.
Home Life

Fred Stays with Me! by Nancy Coffelt (Ages 4-6)


A little girl spends time living at her mom’s home and her dad’s home. Regardless of where she stays, her dog, Fred, travels with her from house to house. The little girl details her different beds in both homes and the different crumbs Fred likes to eat in both homes, as well. The girl finds comfort in Fred as she describes him being happy when she is and supportive when she is sad. Eventually, the little girl’s parents become frustrated with Fred’s barking, sock stealing, and mess and finally say, “Fred can’t stay with me!” The girl corrects her parents and exclaims, “Fred stays with me!” She works with her parents to find solutions for Fred’s pesky behavior so that Fred can continue to be the constant in the little girl’s life.

Fred Stays with Me! gives power and control to the child going through divorce. As Nancy Coffelt writes in the author’s note, “I wanted to instead highlight the many things that can remain constant for families, and especially for the children in those families.” Children need to have some form of consistency when other aspects of life are changing. Having Fred stay with the girl allows her to have a companion and someone to look after. Fred is traveling as she does between homes and is a confidant for the girl. Readers can view the girl sharing the emotional journey of divorce with Fred as they sit in the park and go for walks. This story also allows children to advocate for themselves as the little girl does to keep Fred by her side. Coffelt continued in the author’s note, “My wish is to give children the opportunity to voice what they need in challenging circumstances and to give parents the opportunity to listen.” The second half of this
message is equally important; parents must listen when children express their needs. Luckily, the little girl’s parents were able to put her needs first. Hopefully, parents reading this story with their children will take this moral as well. This book could be used to share with a child experiencing divorce. The neutral colored and earth tone illustrations are calming and welcoming for a book that deals with a serious subject. A teacher could read this book with a student to brainstorm what the child could use as his or her Fred. The child could bring a stuffed animal, a journal, or special blanket back and forth that would be his or her responsibility and aspect of consistency. Fred Stays with Me! is a helpful tool for children who may feel lost during divorce and need a companion to remain close during the experience.

Monday, Wednesday, and Every Other Weekend by Karen Stanton (Ages 4-7)

Henry is a young boy who brings his dog, Pomegranate, with him as he lives in both his mother’s and father’s homes. Henry describes what he enjoys about each home such as “Mama’s perfect golden flapjacks” and “Papa’s perfect pepperoni pizza.” Although Henry seems to enjoy his new homes, Pomegranate misses digging for bones and chasing squirrels at their previous house when Henry’s parents were living together. One morning, Henry wakes up to find that Pomegranate is missing. His parents search in different places but Henry knows exactly where Pomegranate has gone. Henry finds Pomegranate at their original house, which was “down the block, across the park, and around the corner.” Pomegranate and Henry play with the new girl living in the house,
and Henry reflects on what he now has in his two new homes. The story ends with Henry showing a reluctant Pomegranate the way back home.

Karen Stanton uses a variety of mediums to illustrate her book. She incorporates collage, textured painting, and drawing to create the warm and inviting look of *Monday, Wednesday, and Every Other Weekend*. Stanton also creatively uses text and font to express her messages. For example, she uses clippings of numbers for hopscotch to make the game pop off of the page, she swirls the text of different languages throughout Mama’s apartment to show the delicious smells throughout the building, and when the family is searching for Pomegranate, Stanton wrote the words spiraling out of the characters’ mouths so that the reader can get a sense of the family’s voices calling for their beloved pet. Because of these illustrative choices, the reader can feel movement and flow throughout the story. This book conveys that so much happens in life and it is so vibrant no matter where you live.

Stanton expertly includes subtle details to relate to the child reader. In two of the pages illustrating the kitchens at Mama’s and Papa’s homes, the reader can see a calendar with circles. This signifies the days that Henry is with his mom or dad. This is a visual expression of how Henry’s time is shared between both homes. Having a calendar and circling days with different colors to signify where the child is staying can be helpful to children with divorced parents to take control of their living situation. The child can be in charge of the calendar and will always be able to refer to it if there is confusion or the need for comfort. Stanton also places the emotionality on the dog instead of the child. It can be easier for children to displace their feelings of longing. Perhaps they would not be able to communicate that they miss their old home or living with both parents, but if the
pet were to feel that way it would be more comfortable to discuss because it is removed from the child. This book depicts a traditional split-living dynamic of divorced parents. Henry finds joy in his new homes yet can also miss his old life demonstrated through the experience of his pet. Many children would relate to this internal struggle of adjusting to a new living situation while ultimately understanding that they have a new home, or in this case two homes. This book could be used as a read aloud for children of all family dynamics to understand how a child of divorced parents may live and feel.

*My Mother’s House, My Father’s House* by C. B. Christiansen (Ages 4-8)


A little girl describes how the households differ at her mother’s house and at her father’s house. “My mother believes in exercise…My father likes things neat.” After describing each home, the girl imagines how she will organize her future household, starting with, “When I grow up…” At both homes she describes activities, rooms, belongings, pets, photos, transportation, and which days are spent with which parents. In the girls future home, she includes aspects of both of her parents such as gardening for her mother and books for her father. The story ends with a mat on her future doorstep with the words, as her parents would say as she returned to each of their homes, “Welcome Home.”

The illustrations give this book a vintage feel because of the hand-painted style. Irene Trivas’ watercolored paintings are in perfect harmony with C.B. Christiansen’s text. The illustrations are so detailed that the initial paintings of each parent’s house show all
seven rooms at mother’s house and three areas in father’s house. The colors used to paint the parents’ homes are deeper, while the colors used to paint the girl’s future home are bright and exciting. This brings to life the ideal home the girl has imagined.

Children with divorced parents will relate to this story for many reasons. Children often consider the similarities and differences between their parents’ new homes and also compare what each parent values in their home. It is also common for children to dream of a better life for themselves when they are in a less-than-perfect situation. If their current lifestyle is not ideal, they can wish or imagine how they would organize their life if the child had control. The little girl in the story incorporates aspects of both parents’ home lives into her future home signifying that both parents are important to her. Also, she has a picture of her with both parents. This may allude to the child’s desire to reunite the parents or simply to remember a time when the family was together. This book could be read as a read aloud in a classroom because it is more than just a story about divorce; it includes parent-child relationships for all families. Additionally, the story explores a child’s imagination of what life would be like in the future, which applies to all children whether or not they have experienced divorce.

Two Homes by Claire Masurel (Ages 3-5)


Alex is a smiling young boy who has two homes. Sometimes he lives with daddy and sometimes he lives with mommy. Alex tells the reader what else he has two of: front doors, rooms, favorite chairs, kitchens, bathrooms, and telephone numbers. On each side of the page he shows the item he has two of in both homes. The items may be a little
different but he has his necessities in each home. Alex’s parents call him when he is away from one of them and staying with the other. He loves both of his parents even when he is not with one of them. They always tell him, “We love you wherever we are. And we love you wherever you are.”

This book is a simple explanation of how a child might live in two homes with divorced parents. It is very matter-of-fact. Perhaps the greatest takeaway is the positivity of this story. Alex does not appear to be expressing sadness about his parents’ divorce at this time. Rather, he explains how his home life is situated and seems to be enjoying having two of many things in the new arrangement. Children can learn that having two homes does not need to be devastating; it is simply a new way of living and having double belongings can be exciting. Alex also states that he has many friends that come over mommy’s and daddy’s homes. This is important for children to know that both parents will be involved in their friendships and that their friends will be able to interact with both parents. This allows the child to feel comforted that the child’s friendships do not need to change because their living situation is now doubled. Lastly, throughout the book Alex expresses his love for his parents and their love for him. He does not appear to be conflicted about his living arrangement. Alex feels close connections to both parents no matter where he is located and both homes offer special moments. The constant in Alex’s life is the love from his parents.

This story could be shared one-on-one with a younger child because of its simple text and introduction to divorce. The message can help a young child understand the basic nature of divorce and what the child has when living in two homes. It would be extremely beneficial for a child to know from the start of divorce that he or she will
always be the parents’ priority and their relationship with their child will remain loving and supportive.

**Mid-Divorce**

*Dinosaurs Divorce* by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (Ages 8-12)


Dinosaur characters are illustrated in a comic-like fashion to explain the many events, people, and emotions of divorce. Brown and Brown’s choice to use anthropomorphism is supported by Oppenheim, Brenner, and Boegehold (1986) in stating, “Through such [animal] characters, one step removed from reality, the child can try on a whole range of feelings without fear…” (p. 110). Additionally, using dinosaurs in comic-like illustrations adds a sense of humor to ease the child’s anxieties about reading a book focusing on divorce. The book is broken up into sections that discuss terminology, why and how divorce may happen, after the divorce, and how to express oneself during the experience. The text explains to the reader what he or she can expect to happen during a divorce in order to normalize the situation. For example, “Parents may sometimes fight with you when really they are angry with each other.” The book explains, “When your parents divorce, it’s natural to feel sad, angry, ashamed, guilty, afraid, confused, relieved, or worried about who will take care of you.” This book takes the child’s perspective during divorce. The text shows an understanding of the child’s feelings and provides insight into how to work with the potential struggles of divorce. To
conclude, the reader is told, “Divorce in your family means many things will change, but one thing that never changes is your parents’ love for you.”

This informational picture book has many benefits for the mid-elementary reader. This age is suggested for the mature nature of the text and illustrations, such as a parent drinking. Dinosaurs Divorce provides almost an exhaustive list of what may occur during and after a divorce. It would be extremely useful to a child who is ready to emotionally tackle his or her parents’ divorce or is questioning what may come next. Like most books on this list, this book also stresses the importance of the constant love from both parents.

Although Dinosaur’s Divorce is a resource for children, the illustrations and text in this book seem to overwhelm the pages. Each spread page contains up to eight divorce scenarios with text and illustrations. This may be too much visual stimulation for some readers to take in and comprehend comfortably. This book could be shared between a child and a counselor or other educator who is familiar with divorce. There is a great deal of information to be processed, and it would be helpful for a child to discuss this book with a supportive adult.

Divorce is the Worst by Anastasia Higginbotham (Ages 6-10)


Divorce is the Worst provides the reader with an outline of what may happen as parents separate and become divorced. Many things will occur that are potentially traumatic. These include fighting, sadness, confusion, anger, or even guilt. Parents may act in ways different from what the child has experienced. Parents may ignore children, pull their attention, or try to buy them gifts. What is important to remember is that the
divorce is not the child’s fault and that, “Their reasons are theirs, not yours.” The book tells children that it is okay to feel sad, angry, guilty, or confused. Sometimes after a divorce, a parent might become more involved in the child’s life and they can enjoy new activities together. The book ends with a crucial message for the reader, “Divorce means your parents are splitting from each other. YOU stay in one piece.”

After the story, *Divorce is the Worst* offers activities to help children cope with the struggles and emotional whirlwind of divorce. The first suggestion revolves around the question, “What’s in your backpack?” Higginbotham lists the tangible objects that a child would need to pack when traveling from home to home and discusses the emotional baggage the child may bring as well. The author suggests writing down these troubling thoughts and putting them away in a special place so that the child can, “Lay that burden down.” It is important to be able to confront your life and work to accept your struggles. Anastasia Higginbotham’s suggestion to write your own story as a follow-up activity can give the child an emotional outlet to help understand and cope with the divorce.

This book relates to elementary school age children due to the blunt nature of the text and illustrations. The text of this story tells the reader that divorce is not easy and it is upsetting. The reader should already be aware of the troubles of divorce to relate to the story so that the book would not scare a younger reader. The reader should be ready to find coping mechanisms to manage the stressors of divorce. The collaged illustrations require the reader to infer the emotions felt from the character’s face. The juxtaposition of photographs, paper bags, and fabrics bring the story to life while still remaining true to the child’s perspective. The reader can put him or herself into the situations that the narrator is experiencing while also feeling safe to relate because the story is somewhat
fictional. This book seems to be a perfect selection for bibliotherapy. The book could be introduced by a teacher or counselor, and together with the child they can discuss which parts of the story relate to the child’s experience. Recreating the child’s own personal narrative with a supportive adult will allow the child to feel control over the divorce experience through being the expert on his or her own life.

*Priscilla Twice* by Judith Caseley (Ages 6-10)


Priscilla is a little girl who noticed that recently something about her parents has changed. When asked to draw her family in school, “Priscilla put her mama on one side of the paper and her papa on the other.” That night, Priscilla’s friend, Abby, came over for a play date and wondered why Priscilla’s parents did not speak to each other. Priscilla later found out that her parents decided to get a divorce and will no longer be living together. They reminded her, “But both of us will always love you, and nothing will change that.” The next day Priscilla thought that if she was on her best behavior her parents would no longer want a divorce. Unfortunately for Priscilla this was not the case as her parents told her because getting the divorce had nothing to do with Priscilla. Her father moved to a new house in the neighborhood and took a few things from their original home. She would alternate weeks staying with each parent.

Although she had two sets of her belongings, Priscilla was angry with her parents for getting a divorce and living separately. She told the both parents that they did not know how to make meals correctly and that she preferred the opposite parent. She began acting out and drawing pictures of herself with frowns. Finally, after a few weeks had
passed, Priscilla and her parents settled into their new lifestyle. At school, Priscilla drew a new family portrait. On one side was Priscilla and her father and on the other side was Priscilla and her mother. On top of both sides of the portrait were hearts dancing on their heads. Priscilla informs her teacher that there are many types of families.

*Priscilla Twice* explains divorce to older elementary school age children. The story details what may happen before and during divorce. Priscilla witnessed her parents no longer speaking with each other and had a friend ask her for information on why this was happening. Often with divorce, the child’s friends may ask why the family does not function in a way that the friend is familiar. Some parents may not know how to inform their child of divorce and this story speaks to that. The parents were caught off guard with Priscilla asking for information, as if they were not yet planning to tell Priscilla about their separation. However, Priscilla let her parents know that she was aware of a change in their relationship, and her parents said to each other, “It’s time to tell her.” This book shows a very realistic portrayal of how a child might interpret and react to divorce. Priscilla first tries to fix her parents’ marriage with good behavior and then behaves poorly when this does not work, which mirrors the reality of many children believing that their parents’ divorce is a result of their behavior. However, Priscilla’s parents never give-in and respond to her negativity. Instead, they support Priscilla by accommodating her sensible needs such as when the father asks the mother what kind of peanut butter she uses. By highlighting Priscilla’s behavior, the book normalizes a child’s reaction to divorce while showing life will return to a new normal. Throughout the story, Priscilla is supported by her good friend, Abby. Close friendships are necessary when anyone is struggling. When a family is changing, a dear friend remains constant. Priscilla
recognizes that she can vent to Abby because Abby remains a positive confidant. A teacher may send this book home for a child to read with his or her family who is beginning to experience divorce. This book would comfort a child by detailing what is to come and, that throughout it all, the child will remain loved.

*Frames* by Casey Spellman (Ages 6-10)

*Frames* is a wordless picture book that illustrates two young sisters, a mom, and a dad. The girls have individual picture frames and the parents share a heart-shaped frame. The parents’ frame begins to crack, their smiles fade, and eventually the frame breaks in half. The family attempts to repair the frame with glue and tape but neither method prevails. The family is illustrated with a parent on either side and the two little daughters in the middle looking uneasy. One of the sisters reflects on the ‘break’ day and night until she has an idea. The family goes to a frame store and buys new frames, one for each parent. The mother looks content in her own frame and so does the father. Additionally, the children appear to be content with the parents separately. Ultimately, although the family has changed, they remain connected by love. The book ends with the opportunity for children to illustrate their own family in a heart-shaped picture frame.

*Frames* is intended to be used in bibliotherapy for children to express their thoughts and feelings regarding their parents’ divorce and how the changes affect the child and the family. This book can be shared one-on-one with children by teachers, psychologists, and child support groups, such as Banana Splits. The simple images allow a child to find connections between the characters’ emotions and the child reader. The illustrations suggest a story, yet allow for the child to supply the narration with his or her
own experience. *Frames* provides opportunities for children to find themselves in the story because they become the authors and, at the end of the story, the illustrator. This book is intended to help a child find coping mechanisms while utilizing the support of the adult reading the story with the child.
Frames First Draft

Frames

by Casey Spellman
While illustrating *Frames*, I wanted to remain true to my five-year-old self who originally illustrated this story twenty years ago while experiencing divorce myself. The voice of a child-author will speak to the child readers. Although I cannot locate the original copy hidden in my childhood home, I recall the illustrations and emotions vividly. Natalie Goldberg (1986) writes, “...using the details you actually know and have seen will give your writing believability and truthfulness” (p. 41). I kept the images simplistic in order to be accessible to young children to relate to and assist in making meaning.

As a graduate student and teacher, I was inspired by *Kitten’s First Full Moon* by Kevin Henkes (2004), *Papa, please get the moon for me* by Eric Carle (1986), and *My First Day at Nursery School* by Becky Edwards (2002). In *Kitten’s First Full Moon*, Henkes uses only shades of black watercolor and colored pencils, which focuses the reader’s eyes on what the illustrator wants you to see. The contrast of black against white paper is calming and inviting. This simplicity allows the reader to imagine what colors he or she might employ. The characters in *Frames* are also colorless for this reason: it is up to the reader. Providing the characters with skin tones would exclude many readers from identifying with the characters. Without color, the readers can imagine themselves to be in the story with their family and relate to the characters on a more personal level. Although I knew I wanted the characters to be depicted without color, I wondered if color would be necessary to attract the interest of child readers. I noticed that many of the picture books I reviewed for this thesis used calm, neutral colors, which paired beautifully with a story regarding a difficult subject such as divorce. *My First Day at Nursery School* utilizes soothing, pastel watercolors to allow a child to feel comfortable
about entering preschool in the same way that many of the divorce books comfort
children. The illustrations by Anthony Flintoft are simply drawn with a fine tip marker
and painted over faintly with watercolors. This technique incorporates the simplicity of
an outline with pale colors that welcome children to explore and feel safe. *My First Day
at Nursery School*, however, uses color to completely paint the page and I was
envisioning a compromise between the Henkes’ black and white outlines and Flintoft’s
pastel watercolors. Lastly, I looked at *Papa, please get the moon for me*. Eric Carle uses
wide brush strokes to sprawl across two pages illustrating the night sky. This technique is
so beautifully simple and calming. Viewing this book instantly put me at ease and is a
medium I want to incorporate into *Frames* when I add color. The final product of *Frames*
will reflect the inspiration taken from each of these picture book sources. I will keep the
thick, black outline as inspired by Henkes and introduce a wide stroked, pastel,
watercolored background as inspired by Carle and Flintoft. I will keep the characters’
faces and the frames colorless so that the readers’ eye is drawn to the key aspects of the
story’s illustrations.

While developing *Frames*, I collected insight from various child professionals, in
the form of a survey (Appendix A), so that I could learn how to best improve the
illustrations and story. The professional feedback surveys provided many suggestions
about how to improve *Frames* artistically. Several participants commented on the
illustrations of the characters. I met with the studio art teachers at my current preschool
and discussed how to differentiate the characters more clearly. We discovered that many
artists illustrate adult characters with longer, more oval shaped faces and illustrate child
characters with more circular shaped faces. Additionally, the “frame store” illustration on
page 15 will be updated to look more like a store with an awning, a window, and a door. Some professionals commented on how to make *Frames* more universal with the gender of the chosen characters. I will keep the characters as they were originally drawn; however, I will add endpages that reflect various family dynamics. Additionally, I would not be opposed to creating variations of *Frames* for specific families if that would make the story more accessible to the child reader.
Professional Feedback

To assess the effectiveness of a children’s book, one might let children preview the story, however, I chose to first show my book, *Frames*, to a group of professionals to advise me on how *Frames* could be best utilized by children. In creating *Frames*, I was constantly aware of the sensitive nature of the story and the consequences of sharing a story regarding divorce with children. Would it help or hurt the child’s emotional state? Rather than risking the child’s emotional wellbeing, I sought a variety of professionals’ opinions as to whether or not *Frames* should be or was ready to be shared with children.

I spoke with professionals with a wide range of experience and expertise with children in various environments in an attempt to obtain responses that would relate to the whole child. I developed a Professionals Feedback Survey (available in the appendix) in order to gather information and advice relevant to the successful implementation of *Frames*. Beginning in January, I had contacted 16 child professionals and by February, ten surveys were returned. Professionals who participated in this study included a kindergarten teacher who has written her IMP on the use of wordless picture books (1), a director of Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street College of Education who also teaches, researches, and writes about bibliotherapy (2), a teacher educator who teaches a course on children’s literature at Bank Street College of Education (3), a prior preschool teacher/current preschool librarian (4), a screenwriter who advocates for diversity and is twice divorced with two children (5), a clinical psychologist and preschool psychologist (6), a preschool learning specialist and Anti-Defamation League facilitator (7), a licensed clinical social worker (8), a Bank Street College of Education
graduate faculty member and advisor (9), and Head of School for a private institution in Manhattan as well as a Ph.D. in psychology (10).

All ten participants positively responded to the concept of Frames being used as a bibliotherapeutic tool for children experiencing divorce. The first set of questions aimed to assess if the overall concept of frames was understandable and applicable to children. I asked professionals to provide their interpretation of the story. All were able to identify the main points and make sense of the frame analogy. Participant 6 succinctly retold the plot of Frames, “I interpreted Frames as a non-verbal story that reflects the feelings of a child whose parents are getting separated and/or divorced. It simultaneously sequences the events and feelings that a child may feel have as this life-changing event occurs.”

Participants were next asked if and why they feel Frames would be useful to enable children to express their feelings about their parents’ divorce. Again, all professionals responded positively with many discussing the benefit of children and being given the opportunity to express the story in their own words while relating to the illustrated family. Participant 4 explained,

While there is definitely a story, there is room for the children to interpret it differently depending on their own experiences. The pictures are simple but the emotions are clear. Without words, children can use this story to express their personal feelings.

The next set of questions asked for whom the book, Frames, would be for and about its implementation. The professionals’ predominantly agreed that Frames would be best suited for elementary school aged children, which coincided with my intended target
age range. The youngest suggested age was as early as the child is verbal and the oldest age suggested was eleven-years-old. A shared concern was that children would need to be able to make meaning of the frame metaphor and express themselves verbally. Participant 1 explained her opinion on the book’s applicability to the large age range,

This book spans the ages—I would imagine this book to be most appealing from ages 4-11 because of its concrete nature for young children and its ability to go beyond the literal into the figurative ‘frames of mind’ idea and conversation [the notion that the title refers to literal frames and a frame of mind]. I think younger children can handle it because of the literal placing of each family member in frames. I also think this book is great for older children/preteens because of the idea that each person can have their own frame—parents are just as capable in their own frame and don’t need a spouse to be competent and happy.

When asked to consider how each of the participants would ideally introduce this book to children, participants discussed asking children to explain what a frame does and then telling them that the story, Frames, is about a family going through changes. Participant 3 expressed that he would only give necessary information, “I’m not sure I would say much, so as not to interfere with the child’s interpretation and to see if the child “reads” the story from the illustrations. If there’s a lot of adult explaining, I think the power of the story would be lost. I might introduce it by saying that it’s a story about a family.” The next question asked of professionals was how they would follow up with the child after he or she finished “reading” the story. Although many respondents suggested that children illustrate their own family frames, this question provided the greatest array of answers. Recommendations included discussing how the book relates to the child,
offering open-ended materials to observe if the story is integrated into play, answering any questions the child may have, providing the child with a copy of the book to take home, rereading the story, having the child write a sequel to Frames, drawing the child’s family in the final heart repeatedly over time to observe if the child’s interpretation has evolved or if the family has changed further, and depending on the child, exploring through appropriate mediums including art, dramatic play, or discussion. An interesting suggestion was provided by participant 5, “I would [have the child] draw the family in the heart whenever he/she wanted to. And I would ask the child to draw pictures in the heart often to keep tabs on how they’re feeling. Emotions and healing are never linear.” Understanding and coping with a family’s divorce is an ongoing process. Frames needs to be explored continually with a child for optimum results.

The next section of the survey focused on how Frames could be most successful. Professionals were asked their opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of Frames and if/how it could be improved. Responses to the strengths of the book included the simplicity of illustrations, the realistic emotions a child may experience as seen through the characters’ expressions and actions, the wordlessness that does not tell children how to feel thereby allowing there to be no right or wrong responses, the universality of using only black and white colors instead of designating a skin tone, and the concluding message that no matter what a family looks like there is love. Participant 9 wrote what she saw as the strengths in Frames, “It seems easy to follow, original, and provides a visual way of representing a complex issue. The main character also displays strength and resourcefulness in finding a way to manage her feelings about the separation, so it’s a message to young children that they can get through this difficult time.” Participant 10
noticed that, “Every page has something you can circle back to with an open-ended question. For example, some kids have [tried to repair their parents’ relationship with] more than glue and tape by saying, ‘I tried and behaved but my parents didn’t get back together.’”

Participants noted weaknesses and areas that could be improved as well. Respondents suggested improving specific illustrations including the frame store, the roll of tape, and creating greater differentiation between the adult characters from the children. Professionals also wondered how color could be added to keep the child reader engaged, how children with non heterosexual parents would relate, and if the siblings should be a boy and a girl so that readers of both genders could find themselves in the story. Additionally, two participants suggested that parents and professionals would benefit from an accompanying guide to instruct them on how to best use Frames as a tool to help children express themselves because a wordless resource such as this has not yet been produced. A Parent Guide was created (Appendix C), however, participants were not given the guide at the time of the survey. Participant 6 brought up an incredibly valid point yet is difficult to accommodate, “[Weaknesses are] Possibly that it only speaks to the traditional heterosexual couple, but there could be another version to include different family configurations. There could be a boy/girl versions of the books to speak to both genders.” After reading her response, I spoke more with this participant and together devised a possible solution of having endpapers illustrating various family dynamics in heart frames.

Perhaps the most crucial question I sought the answer to was – should a tool, such as Frames, be presented to children by professionals or myself, as the writer of the book?
Divorce is a sensitive and emotional topic; I wanted professionals’ opinions on who would be best to read Frames with children and best educated to support them before, during, and after exploring the story. Eight out of ten respondents wrote they would feel comfortable having Frames shared by both teachers, such as myself, and professionals, such as therapists. Participant 2 believes that, “…either possibility would be interesting. You would need to have a relationship with the child prior to reading the story.” This is incredibly important so that the child feels comfortable in sharing their feelings.

Participant 1 wrote, “I also think if the book is as amazing and concrete as we think it is, a professional and experienced teacher will be able to pick it up and use it as she sees fit for each individual child.” Participant 3 further explained his thinking, “I suggest you do both. School psychologists might find this a helpful tool should they be helping a child or a child’s parents. I suggest for a teacher that it be read to one child or no more than two children at a time to insure the intimacy of the experience and to get a greater sense of the child’s experience of the book.” Participant 6 was one of the two respondents that felt that the book should be shared primarily by professionals. “Let professionals [share the book], this way the book can be used in a therapeutic setting and its effectiveness can be determined.”

The final set of questions asked professionals about how to promote Frames as a bibliotherapeutic school for elementary school age children. The first question I posed to the professionals was if they had seen any tool or resource similar to Frames in their experience. Seven out of ten professionals responded, “No.” The remaining three professionals responded that they have seen books about divorce, however, they, too, have never seen a wordless picture book used as a tool for bibliotherapy. Participant 7
commented, “Yes, but this is unique due to its wordlessness.” Participant 2 wrote, “There are several children's books and workbooks about divorce. I have never seen one without text, however.” Participant 10 added that he has never seen a wordless picture book with a focus on divorce and that prompting conversations with a wordless picture book can be a more natural experience. He feels, “[Picture books with words are] overly prompted. Some people say that kids need to be given the vocabulary to use but that’s not true. They can express their own feelings…There is a difference between prompting with images rather than words. It is a far more natural prompt from a clinical point of view.” The last survey question asked participants if they were aware of any organizations that would be interested in a tool such as Frames. Three participants suggested Banana Splits and five participants referenced various mental health organizations including The American Psychological Association, Division of Child Therapy, North Shore Family and Guidance Center, and individual school or independent child therapists. Participant 4 responded, “…it seems like a perfect resource for school psychologists and therapists. It is the perfect tool to inspire children to talk. I imagine you can learn a lot from a child’s interpretation of the pictures.” Participant 10 went into depth regarding the possible ways to best utilize Frames as a program for all children experiencing changes in their families. “I would suggest Banana Splits or any afterschool play groups like Gateways. It could be readily adapted for adoption, foster care, loss of a loved one, or anyone requiring residential care at a young age. This could be a wordless framework with simple images for a lot of cool things: depression, exclusion, diversity work, permanence, etc. A government sector may pick it up for their website [to distribute to family’s or professionals].
Implementation

From this data it is evident that a bibliotherapeutic tool, such as Frames, is best utilized when a child explores the metaphorical illustrations with a well-informed adult. Viewing a picture book regarding divorce may evoke many emotional responses for the child and the child may require support at the time of viewing the book to further understand the illustrations or discuss the child’s thoughts and feelings about their own family situation. In the professional interviews conducted for Frames, many agreed that this type of picture book should be introduced to children by adults that are psychologists, teachers, or part of mental health groups, such as Banana Splits. A one-on-one or small group setting is also advised due to the personal nature of discussing divorce and the desire to ensure the child feels safe in expressing his or her thoughts and emotions.

The adult that shares Frames with a child must be well-informed about the child’s needs, developmental norms for children coping with divorce, and the format of the book. An adult who has established rapport with the child is an ideal candidate for a reading partner. “Many therapists believe that one must develop a bond before engaging in therapy techniques” (DiGiuseppe, Linscott, & Jilton, 2015, p. 96-97). The adult sharing Frames must also determine if the child is capable of understanding the frames metaphor, which professional interviewees suggested would be approximately elementary school age children. Children of all ages must feel they are in a comfortable and safe environment with a supportive and familiar adult in order to speak most openly about their feelings and emotions. The term “therapeutic alliance” was created to express the unique connection and relationship formed between therapist and client. In this alliance,
there is a focus on bond. “‘Bond’ describes the system of positive attachments between
the client and therapist, including trust, acceptance and confidence” (Campbell &
Simmonds, 2011, p. 196). Children must have trust, acceptance, and confidence in an
adult in order to foster a relationship that allows for support and open communication to
explore coping mechanisms for dealing with their parents’ divorce.

Once a child and adult pairing has reached a level of comfort, rapport, and
compatibility, the adult may introduce Frames. According to the professional interviews,
the adult might discuss with the child what frames are and their function. For example,
frames hold pictures of people, often in families or sometimes individually. The adult
would next tell the child that he or she has a book for the child about a family. The book
is without words and the adult needs the child’s help to tell the story. The child may first
preview the illustrations without speaking and then return to the beginning to narrate the
story. The adult should also emphasize that there is no right or wrong telling of the story,
rather that it is for the child to decide, as an author would do. The adult may interrupt the
child’s storytelling for comprehension questions or wait until the child has finished
narrating the story.

The discussion or activity following the reading of Frames is when the adult can
gain insight into the child’s choice of narration and an understanding of their own
family’s divorce. Depending upon the child’s storytelling, the subsequent discussion may
require greater or minimal prompting and scaffolding. As Rosenblatt (1982) states, “The
author, she points out, may plan a particular book, but ‘one cannot plan what children
will take from it’ ” (p. 272). Frames is designed to trigger discussion regarding various
phases in the process of divorce including home life before divorce on page 3, the initial
separation on page 4, a child’s fantasies of reconciliation on pages 4-9, the child feeling caught in the middle of the two parents on page 12, changes in the child’s behavior on page 13, new living arrangements on pages 19-20, and coping mechanisms to lead to greater understanding and possible acceptance on pages 21-22. Adults may ask the child how the characters are feeling and why, what has caused certain events to occur, and if the child knows any family in their life like the one illustrated. By listening to the child’s narration and asking questions, the adult can gain insights to the child’s current understanding of divorce and how the child feels about himself or herself in relation to the changing family.

The final step in sharing Frames is an activity to engage the child and allow him or her to express understandings in a variety of ways. On the final page of Frames, there is an open heart frame that is intended for children readers to illustrate their interpretation of their own family in frames. As one professional suggested, this activity could be completed and discussed during a following session with the child after initially reading Frames. Another professional suggested continually having the child draw his or her family’s frames in order to observe how the child’s perspective is changing. Other activities could include dramatic play, puppetry, music, or art. The child may even want to illustrate his or her own entire Frame story. It is important to prompt the child yet let him or her instruct the adult on how he or she would like to proceed. If the adult has established rapport with the child, the adult would already have insight into the child’s preference for expression. Many child professionals recognize that, “Intuition, being attuned to the client’s feelings and what is needed in the moment…” is a powerful tool to
best serve the child in a natural and comfortable setting (Campbell & Simmonds, 2011, p. 202).

The wordless picture book, Frames, is accompanied by a guide for parents to explain how a parent can interpret how the child narrates the story and conversations their child might start after reading Frames (Appendix C). The Parent Guide also provides advice for parents experiencing divorce in the form of a list of do’s and don’ts for interacting with their children during the time the family is undergoing change. It is suggested that the child first experiences Frames with a child professional and then can bring the book home to further review it with parents. Parents may find the guide useful in understanding how to support their child in expressing feelings and emotions.

The application of Frames is best summarized by Bettelheim (1975),

But for a story to enrich his life it must stimulate his imagination, help him to develop his intellect and to clarify him emotions, be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations, give full recognition to his difficulties, suggest solutions to the problems that perturb him, and promote confidence in himself and his future (p. 1).
Frames Revised

Frames

by Casey Spellman
Bibliography

References


**Children’s Literature Cited**


Appendix A: Professionals Feedback Survey

Name ____________________________________ Date _________________

Profession ____________________________________________________________

1. Write a description of the story as you interpreted it.

   [ ]

2. Would you find Frames useful in working with children to express their ideas about their family’s divorce? Why/why not? If yes, how would you use Frames?

   [ ]

3. For what age would you recommend Frames? Why?

   [ ]

4. How would you introduce this book to a child/what information do you think they would need before reading Frames?

   [ ]

5. How would you follow-up with the child reading Frames?

   [ ]

6. What strengths and weaknesses do you find in Frames?

   [ ]

7. How would you add to or improve Frames?

   [ ]

8. In order to obtain my research on the effectiveness of this tool, do you suggest I let professionals use Frames with children and report back to me or that I introduce Frames to children myself?

   [ ]

9. Do you know of any similar tools, books, or resources?

   [ ]

10. Do you know of any organizations that might be interested in a tool such as Frames?

    [ ]
Appendix B: Letters Of Consent

Dear Professional,

My name is Casey Spellman and I am a graduate student in Early Childhood and Childhood General Education at Bank Street College of Education in New York. I am also a full-time teacher at Horace Mann Nursery Division. I am currently conducting research for my master’s thesis and will be acting as the principal investigator for this study. The goal of my master’s thesis is to develop a therapeutic tool (in the form of a wordless picture book) to aid children in discussing divorce in their family. I am interested in learning about your experiences in working with families of divorce and how children comprehend and communicate these family changes. I am also interested in learning how children would respond to this approach and how it can be most beneficial to children. The information that you provide will provide me with insights that will be used in the planning of this tool.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to review the tool and provide feedback in an interview. This process should take about an hour. Your participation is voluntary and you can refuse to answer any questions or terminate your participation at any time without penalty. Please note that if the feedback that you share during this time is included in the thesis, your name will be changed to protect your privacy. Please also note that the master’s thesis will be submitted as a PDF to the Bank Street Library where it will be catalogued as part of the Library collection and downloadable via a live link on the catalog entry. It will also be entered into an international database for wider circulation.

Please sign on the lines below to indicate that you grant permission for the information that you provide to be used for the purpose of this study.

Thank you for taking the time to share your insights with me. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at cspellman@bankstreet.edu.

Sincerely,

Casey Spellman

******************************************************************************************************

I agree to participate in this study.

Name of Participant _____________________________________________________ please print

Signature ___________________________________________ Date ____________________
Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Casey Spellman and I am a graduate student at Bank Street College of Education in New York. I am currently conducting research for my final master’s project on a therapeutic tool (in the form of a wordless picture book) to aid children in discussing divorce in their family. I am interested in learning how children would respond to this approach and how it can be most beneficial to children. Children will be asked to read the story aloud and reflect on the content. This session will take about 30 minutes.

Please note that your name and your child’s name will be changed to protect your privacy. The study may be submitted as a PDF to the Bank Street library where it would be catalogued as part of the Library collection and downloadable via a live link on the catalog entry. It will also be entered into a database for wider accessibility.

Please note that your child may refuse to answer any questions, if he/she so chooses. You or your child are also free to terminate your participation at any time without penalty.

Please sign the lines below to indicate that you grant permission for the information your child provides to be used for the purpose of this study, and for me to record this session.

Thank you for taking the time to share your insights with me. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at cspellman@bankstreet.edu or my faculty mentor, Mollie Welsh Kruger, at mwelshkruger@bankstreet.edu.

Sincerely,

Casey Spellman

I grant permission for my child to participate in this study, and I give my permission to record this session.

Name of child __________________________________________________________
please print

Name of parent/guardian _________________________________________________
please print

Signature (parent/guardian) _________________________________ Date __________
Appendix C: Parent Guide

Parent Guide
A Child’s Perspective of Divorce

Framed

by Casey Spellman
Introduction

My parents divorced when I was three; they have remained close friends. I grew up living with my mother and saw my father twice a week. My older sister and I had sleepovers at his apartment. When I was eight-years-old, both of my parents married. I loved both of their spouses. When I was ten, both of my parents had another child. Today, I have my older sister, my mom has one daughter, and my dad has a son and a daughter. The three younger children all play together and the adults will occasionally join for a meal. My parents always came together for a special occasion when I asked them. They behaved in a friendly manner when with my sister and me. My concerns as a child of divorce were whether or not my dad would know my teachers, whether we could celebrate together on my actual birthday, and if my friends would come over for play dates at both homes. My parents worked together to accommodate and cater to my egocentric needs. Divorce was not some great evil; it was a variation. I still had a mom and dad but now I also had two stepparents. I still had my sister and now I even had half-siblings. I know this is not the tale for everyone. I was very fortunate to have a positive divorce experience.

When I was five I illustrated a simpler version of this book and titled it Frames. The concept was that my parents lived in a heart shaped picture frame that broke. Naturally, I thought the only solution to a broken frame was to bring it to the frame store. We came home with two separate frames for them. Yes it was different but it was not bad or worse. Everyone was happy in the end with their own frames.

My story is intended for a child reader. This story is without words intentionally. The reader may not be at reading level yet. Without words, the child can narrate his or her own understanding and experience with divorce or separation. My divorce story was positive but each one is individualized. As a writer, teacher, and child of divorce, I do not want to influence a child to feel a certain way. A wordless book allows children to tell their own story in a safe environment because they are referring to the characters instead of saying how they personally feel. I hope parents will give this book to their child and listen for the story he or she tells. I hope it will give a parent greater understanding of how a child perceives his or her own story of divorce. Lastly, a wordless book is accessible to children of all languages, cultures, and even variations. A picture can tell a thousand words. I hope my story will allow children to use their words to express their perspective on divorce.

I have created a written guide for parents to accompany my illustrated story. I believe that we are all well intentioned. Unfortunately, human nature allows parents to get wrapped up in their own struggles and not focus on the children involved and how they are affected. My guide will cover some topics that a child may discuss when reading Frames. These include pre-divorce, the separation, fantasies of reconciliation, being caught in the middle, changes in behavior, living arrangements, and divorce with variations. I hope Frames and the accompanying parent guide will help children express themselves and allow parents to gain an understanding of their child’s experience before, during, and after a divorce.
Pre-Divorce

Before the divorce, children will notice a change in behaviors of their parents. Perhaps there is fighting, silence, or a parent is not at home as much. Although the child will notice a change, he or she will not know why this is happening. This change may upset the child or the child may ignore the situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON’T</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a pleasant and safe living environment</td>
<td>Fight in front of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be present and available to spend time with children</td>
<td>Leave home to avoid a spouse and in turn leave children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be honest and let children know sometimes parents disagree and it is not children’s fault</td>
<td>Pretend the arguments are not happening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak with spouse about issues</td>
<td>Take anger out on children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let children know they can talk to you about feelings</td>
<td>Tell children not to worry – it is natural to feel this way when parents fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind children how much both parents love them</td>
<td>Try to show children one parent loves them more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Separation

When two parents separate, children may be heartbroken. The two people they love the most are no longer a unit. A child will continue to wonder why this happened. Children will want to know where they will live and where the parents will live, if the parents still love each other, if the parents still love the children, if the children will change schools or move, and what will happen to the family. They may ask these questions directly or quietly wonder to themselves. It is important to discuss the new changes factually so the child can feel comfortable, protected, and safe. Open communication is best for the child to cope with divorce.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO</th>
<th>DON’T</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be available to spend time, comfort, and support children</td>
<td>Avoid children so that they will not know what is happening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer questions children may have, in an age-appropriate manner</td>
<td>Tell children it is “grown-up stuff” or that they will understand when they are older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be honest about what has happened</td>
<td>Give false hope that the other parent will come back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrange time for children to see both parents or at least talk on the phone</td>
<td>Keep children away from spouse because a parent is angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind children how much both parents love them</td>
<td>Try to show children one parent loves them more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fantasies of Reconciliation

For their whole lives, children have seen their parents together. They have seen their parents caring for each other, so now they think maybe the parents just forgot. Children think that parents can soon remember how to care for each other and reconcile. Children might think of plans or get excited for their parents to get back together. Separation might not seem so final. Children may consider it to be temporary because they are not settled in the new dynamic. This is part of the denial phase of loss. Children cannot change their situation so they imagine a more ideal life. Eventually, they will come to accept the reality of divorce with the parents’ help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO</th>
<th>DON’T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell children that parents will not live together</td>
<td>Avoid an uncomfortable conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell children that their parents will not be getting back together in the future</td>
<td>Let children believe that the separation is temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow children to express sadness over this loss</td>
<td>Tell children to “get over it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assure children that parents can be happier even if they are not together</td>
<td>Let children believe parents are leading sad and lonely lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind children how much both parents still love them</td>
<td>Try to show children one parent loves them more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Caught in the Middle

Many children of divorce often feel caught in the middle. They may blame themselves for the divorce or feel like the messenger between parents. Parents may even talk negatively about the other one to the child. Whether or not the parent realizes this, it is the child’s reality. When the child is put in this situation, he or she may become upset with the parent. This sort of stress and pressure should never be on the child.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON’T</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk to a therapist or friend</td>
<td>Vent to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give messages directly to other parent</td>
<td>Use children as messengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow children to discuss time with other parent</td>
<td>Talk negatively about other parent to children or tell children not to talk about the other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind children how much both parents still love them</td>
<td>Try to show children one parent loves them more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind children they can love and care for both parents</td>
<td>Make children feel bad for loving and caring for their other parent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Change in Behavior**

A child will experience so many feelings during this time. He or she may feel sad, angry, afraid, confused, ashamed, guilty, relieved, or worried. The child may act out negatively or regress in school. This is perfectly normal. What is important is to support your child through these emotions. Let him or her express these feelings in a healthy way. Be available to listen to him or her vent or provide dolls or figurines so the child can act out what he or she is thinking and experiencing in playing pretend. These changes will settle down and phase back to status quo as time passes and the child once again feels comforted and settled with a slightly different dynamic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON’T</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allow children to express feelings about divorce</td>
<td>Avoid discussing the divorce or difficult topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring children to family/child therapist if necessary</td>
<td>Be afraid to admit children need more support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give children time to adjust</td>
<td>Assume children will quickly move on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show children healthy ways to express anger or sadness</td>
<td>Assume children know how to cope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow children to spend time with friends</td>
<td>Tell children to spend more time with family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind children how much both parents still love them</td>
<td>Try to show children one parent loves them more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Living Arrangements

When parents divorce, children will have a different living experience with only one parent. They may stay in their home or move to another home in the same town or a different one. This will be very upsetting. The child may now feel like things are unfair or not how they used to be\(^1\). The child may also miss the other parent very much. This will be a hard adjustment. Home will eventually return to a feeling of safety and comfort. Children may lose things more easily or forget things at one parent’s home\(^2\). Children might forget which home they are going to or want to be with one parent over the other.

Visiting a parent who used to live with the child may seem strange at first\(^1\). Children will learn to understand how each household runs. Different homes will have different rules\(^2\). It is important for the child to feel comfortable in both homes. Parents may give opposite instructions and this can be confusing for the child. Children may begin to favor one home over the other. One parent may be more present than the other\(^2\) or some children may notice a parent buying them gifts\(^1\). It can become confusing when parents show love in different ways.

Children may feel guilty to show one parent love in front of the other. The child should be able to express him or herself freely without judgment. Children will find positive and negative attributes about both homes and both parents. They should be allowed to uncover these feelings. Children may want to spend more time with friends or have friends at both homes. It will take time to adjust but children will eventually become comfortable navigating between both homes.
### Living Arrangements (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO</th>
<th>DON’T</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consider buying duplicates to make children feel at home with both parents</td>
<td>Get angry at children for leaving items at the other parent’s house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a schedule for children to remind them which parent they will be with</td>
<td>Make surprise changes to who will care for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow children to express feelings for other parent</td>
<td>Be upset with children for wanting or missing the other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate with the other parent on rules</td>
<td>Send children to discuss rules with the other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk with children about what you can do together to make the home more ideal</td>
<td>Get upset with children for preferring one home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask children to share information about their life</td>
<td>Assume children do not want to talk about their life or have already told the other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow children to call the other parent while with one</td>
<td>Assert that children should focus on the parent they are with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite children’s friends to both homes</td>
<td>Make children spend alone time if they want friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind children how much both parents still love them</td>
<td>Try to show children one parent loves them more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Divorce with Variations: Parent

For the Parents: Divorce may be that much more difficult when a child with variations is involved. There are further considerations for the parents and perhaps more confusion for the child. The parents must work together to ensure the needs of the child will continue to be met. This includes emotional and financial support. When considering living, parents should consider who the primary caregiver has been, will be, and if it would be too disruptive for one parent\(^3\). Parents should consider financial obligations including education, travel, therapies, and future needs\(^3\). Some states allow child support to be paid until adulthood for children with special needs so it is important to check state laws\(^3\). It may be helpful to hire a special needs attorney that is familiar with these laws and will ensure the child is set up to benefit from the state\(^3\).
Divorce with Variations: Child

According to the Child: A child with a variation will feel even more at fault for a divorce. Parents may in reality be getting a divorce because one is not equipped to care for the child or could not handle the stress and pressure of raising the child. The child may think that if he or she did not require extra care, work, or money that the parents would not be getting divorced. People also may assume that a child with a variation has a lower intelligence, which is not always the case. The child with a variation should still be kept informed of the situation with his or her parents4. People often assume the child cannot handle this information but rather it makes the child more confused and frustrated to not have the information. Symptoms a child experiences may worsen during divorce. These can include short-term withdrawal, regression, aggression, loss of language ability, loss of social skills, loss of toilet training, emotional outbursts, loss of academic skills, depression, self-injury, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, running away, or even worsened physical condition4. Parents must be aware of their child’s condition even during a stressful time between them. Lastly, a child may worry about who will care for him or her now that the parents are not together4. Who has the decision making power in terms of the child’s health? Who can ensure the child will get his or her medication and supports? It is the parents’ responsibility to ensure the child feels safe, supported, cared for, and loved especially during divorce, no matter what the child’s needs may be.
### Additional Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Age</th>
<th>What children understand</th>
<th>Children’s thoughts and feelings</th>
<th>What parents can do for children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Infants   | • Infants notice changes in parents’ energy level and emotional state.  
           • Older infants notice when one parent is no longer living in the home. | • More irritability, such as crying and fussing.  
              • Changes in sleeping, napping and other daily routines. | • Keep normal schedules and routines.  
              • Reassure infants of your continued presence with physical affection and loving words.  
              • Keep children’s favorite toys, blankets or stuffed animals close at hand. |
| Toddlers  | • Recognize that one parent no longer lives at home.  
           • May express empathy toward others, such as a parent who is feeling sad. | • May have difficulty separating from parents.  
              • May express anger toward parent.  
              • May lose some of the skills they have developed, like toilet training.  
              • Toddlers may show some of the behaviors that they outgrew, such as thumbsucking.  
              • Sleeping and naptime routines may change.  
              • Older toddlers may have nightmares. | • Spend more time with children when preparing to separate (e.g., arrive 10 to 15 minutes earlier than usual when you take your child to child care).  
              • Provide physical and verbal reassurance of your love.  
              • Show understanding of child’s distress; recognize that, given time and support, old behaviors (thumbsucking) will disappear and newly developed skills (toilet training) will reappear.  
              • Talk with other important adults and caregivers about how to support your child during this transition time. |

Source: Helping children understand divorce
## Additional Resources (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Age</th>
<th>What children understand</th>
<th>Children’s thoughts and feelings</th>
<th>What parents can do for children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool and early elementary</td>
<td>• Preschoolers recognize that one parent no longer lives at home.</td>
<td>• Will likely blame themselves for the divorce.</td>
<td>• Repeatedly tell children that they are not responsible for the divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Elementary school children begin to understand that divorce means their parents will no longer be married and live together, and that their parents no longer love each other.</td>
<td>• May worry about the changes in their daily lives.</td>
<td>• Reassure children of how their needs will be met and of who will take care of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Have more nightmares.</td>
<td>• Talk with children about their thoughts and feelings; be sensitive to children's fears.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• May exhibit signs of sadness and grieving because of the absence of one parent.</td>
<td>• Plan a schedule of time for children to spend with their other parent. Be supportive of children's ongoing relationship with the other parent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Preschoolers may be aggressive and angry toward the parent they blame.</td>
<td>• Read books together about children and divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Because preschoolers struggle with the difference between fantasy and reality, children may have rich fantasies about parents getting back together.</td>
<td>• Gently, and matter-of-factly, remind children that the divorce is final and that parents will not get back together again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preteens and adolescents</td>
<td>• Understand what divorce means but may have difficulty accepting the reality of the changes it brings to their family.</td>
<td>• May feel abandoned by the parent who moves out of the house.</td>
<td>• Maintain open lines of communication with children; reassure children of your love and continued involvement in their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Although thinking at a more complex level, still may blame themselves for the divorce.</td>
<td>• May withdraw from long-time friends and favorite activities.</td>
<td>• Whenever possible, both parents need to stay involved in children's lives, know children's friends, what they do together, and keep up with children's progress at school and in other activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• May act out in uncharacteristic ways (start using bad language, become aggressive or rebellious).</td>
<td>• Honor family rituals and routines (Sunday dinner, weeknight homework time, grocery shopping together, watching favorite television shows or movies as a family).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• May feel angry and unsure about their own beliefs concerning love, marriage, and family.</td>
<td>• If you need to increase children's household responsibilities, assign chores and tasks that are age-appropriate (help with laundry, housecleaning, yard work, meal preparations); show appreciation for children's contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• May experience a sense of growing up too soon.</td>
<td>• Avoid using teenagers as confidants; plan special time for yourself with adult friends and family members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• May start to worry about adult matters, such as the family's financial security.</td>
<td>• Tell children who will be attending special occasions such as sporting events and graduation ceremonies, especially if you plan to take a new romantic partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• May feel obligated to take on more adult responsibilities in the family.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Helping children understand divorce
## Additional Resources

### What I need from my mom and dad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ I need both of you to stay involved in my life. Even if you don’t live close by, please write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions about who I spend time with and what I like and don’t like to do. When you don’t stay involved in my life, I feel like I’m not important and that you don’t really love me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Please communicate directly with my other parent so that I don’t have to send messages back and forth. I want you to talk with each other so that the messages are communicated the right way and so that I don’t feel like I am going to mess up.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Please stop fighting and work hard to get along with each other. Try to agree on matters related to me and my needs. When you fight about me, I think that I did something wrong and I feel guilty.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ When talking about my other parent, please say only nice things, or don’t say anything at all. When you say mean, unkind things about my other parent, I feel like you are putting me down and expecting me to take your side.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ I want to love you both and enjoy the time that I spend with each of you. Please support me and the time that I spend with each of you. If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides and love one parent more than the other.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Please remember that I want both of you to be a part of my life. I count on my mom and dad to raise me, to teach me what is important, and to help me when I have problems.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Helping children understand divorce
Additional Resources: Books

- **Two Homes by Claire Masurel**
  “A young boy named Alex enjoys the homes of both of his parents who live apart but love Alex very much.”

- **Fred Stays with Me by Nancy Coffelt**
  “A child describes how she lives sometimes with her mother and sometimes with her father, but her dog is her constant companion.”

- **Dinosaurs Divorce by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown**
  “A comprehensive, sensitive guide for changing families, Dinosaurs Divorce helps readers understand what divorce means, why it happens, and how to best cope with everyone’s feelings.”

- **Divorce is Not the End of the World: Zoe and Evan’s Coping Guide for Kids by Zoe and Evan Stern**
  “A teenage brother and sister whose parents are divorced discuss topics relating to this situation, respond to letters from other children, and offer tips based on their experience. Includes insights from their mother.”

Source: Helping children understand divorce
References