

Poof, Disappeared! What Happened?



Divorce or separation can be confusing for a child, especially when the child thinks he or she is going to disappear. Read about one child's confusion and how this single parent handled the situation.

by Linda Ranson Jacobs

Hey Mom, what happens when a kid disappears?" my eight-year-old son asked. I had been standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes and intermittently staring out the window. Since my children's father had walked out, it seemed like I was always walking around in a constant daze and only half listening to what people said. I shook my head to try and clear out the ever-present fog and asked, "Son, what did you ask me?"

He repeated his question, but this time he added, "I mean, what is going to happen when I disappear? Where do you go when you disappear? What happened to all my friends when they disappeared?" His words came tumbling out in a rush, while his face mirrored the panicked sound in his voice.

"Son, what do you mean by 'disappeared'?" I asked. He went on to explain, "Well, see, when Ben's parents got a divorce, he disappeared. He was my best friend, but he never came back to school or church. You remember that boy, Johnny, who lived across the street? When his parents got a divorce, he disappeared too. He was here on Monday, and he told me his parents were getting a divorce, and then the next Monday he was gone. I went over there and knocked on the door, and nobody came to the door. Then the other day there was a moving truck in front of his

house, and new people were moving in. I never got to see Johnny." Then for emphasis he added, "I never got to see either of them ever again! Two friends just gone! Poof, disappeared!"

That's when it dawned on me—as adults embroiled in a separation or a divorce, we forget the children. We don't realize each child has his or her own understanding of divorce, and each child's level of knowledge is developed from personal experiences. When my husband told our children we were getting a divorce, he didn't bother to explain exactly what a divorce is. My son understood it using the only experience he had with divorce. He automatically assumed he was going to disappear. That's where his understanding took him—wondering where people go when they disappear.

I quickly asked God to give me words of wisdom, took in a deep breath and began to explain: "Brian, when Ben's parents divorced, his mom couldn't afford to live in their house, so they had to move. When Johnny's parents divorced, the same thing happened. They now live in an apartment. Ben and Johnny haven't disappeared."

"You mean they are okay? They just moved?" he asked. "Why didn't somebody tell me? I have been so worried," he almost shouted.

Schoolteachers and child care staff know all too well the disappearing dilemma. Children are here one day and gone the next. For these children, what happened to closure? Children need adults who can give them guidance in ending friendships and starting new ones. This starts with respecting the children enough to announce they are going to be leaving and then allowing them the chance to say good-bye. It continues with being encouraged and taught in the fine art of relationship building. How are children to know if they are not taught? Parents are the people children trust enough to guide them.

I can only imagine what this must be like to a child, always wondering, “Am I going to see my best friend tomorrow? If I’m the one left behind, should I look for another friend? Or will my best friend suddenly appear again? If I’m the one who has to leave, will I worry about the friends I leave behind? Will I wonder if they are worried about me? Do I try and make new friends only to be yanked up and moved again?

What pressure we put on children sometimes. Many of these misunderstandings could be avoided by discussion and conversation. Children are adaptable, but only when they are included. This is especially hard for single parents raising their children alone. So many things to do and remember, and sometimes a single parent is barely able to make it through the day without collapsing from exhaustion. However, when you find you have to make changes, plan on how you are going to tell the children. Don’t let them think they are going to disappear.

Regarding my son? God gave me the wisdom to find his best friend Ben. They had moved to another town. We called Ben’s mom, and that summer we were able to let Ben and Brian spend the day together. They

exchanged phone numbers and were allowed long distance phone privileges.

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