

in relation to custody and visitation because infants need a stable daily routine and regular contact with a primary caregiver to develop secure attachment. Separations from a primary caregiver should be brief. Increased infant irritability or listlessness and withdrawal may be signs of distress for an infant. **Preschool children** are characterized by having magical beliefs about cause and effects and an egocentric view of the world. They may believe that something they did caused the divorce, leading them to be particularly upset. They may engage in unusual behaviors that they believe will bring the parents back together again. At this age, parents need to deliver a clear message that the divorce was related to disagreements between the parents, that nothing the child did caused the divorce, and that nothing the child could do would bring the parents back together again. Preschool children may reason that if the parents left each other they also might leave the child. To counteract this fear of abandonment, children may need to be reassured that although parents separated, they will not abandon the child and that the child's relationship with both parents will endure.

**School-age children** have a concrete understanding of cause and effect; if something bad happened, they understand that something caused it to happen. However they are not likely to understand fully the subtleties of parental conflict or the idea that multiple factors contribute to a conflict. Children at this age may still worry that something they did caused the divorce. They may express more anger than younger children and often feel rejected. Many young school-age children worry about what will happen to one or both parents. School performance often deteriorates. Older elementary school-age children may believe that one parent was wronged by the other. This belief, in conjunction with their concrete understanding of cause and effect, allows children to be easily co-opted by one parent to take sides against the other. Parents need to understand this vulnerability and resist the temptation to support their child in taking sides.

**Adolescents** may respond to the divorce by acting out, becoming depressed, or experiencing somatic symptoms. Adolescents are developing a sense of autonomy, a sense of morality, and the capacity for intimacy, and divorce may lead them to question previously held beliefs. They may be concerned about what the divorce means for their future and whether they too will experience marital failure. Questioning of previous beliefs in conjunction with decreased supervision may set the stage for risk-taking behaviors, such as truancy, sexual behaviors, and alcohol or drug use.

### Outcome of Divorce

One of the best predictors of children's adaptation to divorce is whether the physical separation is associated with a decrease in the child's exposure to parental discord. In most cases, divorced parents still must interact with each other around the child's schedule, child custody and support, and other parenting issues. These types of issues create the potential for the child to have ongoing exposure to significant discord between the parents. For example if one parent tends to keep the child up much later than the bedtime at the other parent's house, sleep problems may develop. When children feel caught in the middle of ongoing conflicts between their divorced parents, behavior or emotional problems are much more likely. Regardless of how angry parents are with each

other, the parents should be counseled that they must shield their child from this animosity. Clear rules about schedules, discipline, and other parenting roles is ideal, but in cases of conflict it can also be helpful for the pediatrician to help a parent accept that he or she can only control his or her actions and decisions related to the child. When parents have trouble resolving these issues, mediation may be helpful. Pediatricians need to be wary of parents' attempts to recruit them into custody battles to substantiate claims of poor parenting, unless the pediatrician has first-hand knowledge that the concerns are valid.

Although the primary physical residence for most children is still with the mother, the court's bias toward preferring mothers in custody decisions has decreased, and there is more emphasis on including both parents in the child's life. In the early 1980s, 50% of children had no contact with their fathers 2 or 3 years after a divorce, whereas today only 20% to 25% of children have no contact with their father. Most states now allow joint physical or legal custody. In joint physical custody, the child spends a significant amount of time with each parent, and in joint legal custody, parents share authority in decision making. Although joint custody arrangements may promote the involvement of both parents in the child's life, they also can be a vehicle through which parents continue to express their anger at each other. When parents have severe difficulty working together, joint custody is an inappropriate arrangement and has been associated with deterioration in the child's psychological and social adjustment.

Divorce often creates financial difficulties. Family income usually declines in the first year after the divorce. Only about half of mothers who have child support awards receive the full amount, and one fourth receive no money at all. These financial changes may have multiple adverse affects on the child. A move to a new house may require the child to attend a new school disrupting peer relationships and other potential supports. The child may spend more time in child care if one or both parents have to increase work hours.

### Role of the Pediatrician

Pediatricians may be confronted with issues related to marital discord before the divorce, may be consulted around the time of the divorce, or may be involved in helping the family to manage issues in the years after the divorce. The pediatrician can be an important voice in helping the parents understand and meet the child's needs (Table 26-1). Before the divorce, parents may wonder what they should tell their children. Children should be told of the parents' decision before the physical separation. The separation should be presented as a rational step in managing marital conflict and should prepare the child for the changes that will occur. Parents should be prepared to answer children's questions, and they should expect that the questions will be repeated over the next months. Once parents have told children of the separation, it may be confusing to the child if the parents continue to appear to live together and may raise false hopes that the parents will not divorce.

Many parents report not feeling like their life had stabilized until 2 to 3 years or more after the divorce, and for some the divorce remains a painful issue 10 years later. The child's emotional adjustment to divorce is closely predicted by the parents' adjustment so parents should be encouraged to get help for themselves if they are struggling emotionally after a divorce.