

DEALING WITH CHILDREN - THE INNOCENT VICTIMS of DIVORCE



Marriages break down and divorces result when adults are unable to make their relationships work. But what about the children whose parents have decided to divorce?

Typically, children are the innocent victims of divorce. And too often, parents who divorce are so involved with their own problems that they are unaware of the needs of the children.

When Ed and Susan separated, Susan went back to work and came home too exhausted each day to have any patience with the children. Fifteen-year-old Rachel had to make the evening meals and do most of the housework, while 12-year-old Michael became the "man of the house" and was expected to do repairs and other jobs that his father had typically done.

Ed didn't see the kids very often. It was "too painful"- and besides, there wasn't enough room at his apartment for all of them to be together anyway.

None of this was ever explained to Rachel and Michael. It just happened. They became very angry, but they couldn't tell Mom because she was too tired, and they couldn't tell Dad because he was already having trouble coping. The anger typically came out in arguments between Rachel and Michael, and in Michael's case in increased fighting in school.

For children to survive the breakup of their parents, there are at least five primary needs that must be met.

The first is information. Children need to know the reasons why mom and dad are getting a divorce. They also need to know what is going to happen to them now. What is divorce all about? What is it going to be like for me?

They also need to know how they are going to be taken care of in the future. How are they going to continue to relate to both mom and dad? Are they still relatives of grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles on both sides? This information is important for several reasons, perhaps the most important being that the child needs to be told that the divorce is not his fault.

Too often we try to protect our children, especially if they are young, from the pain of divorce by not telling them what is happening and

hoping they will figure it out later when they are older. Unfortunately, the younger the child the more likely he is to believe that the divorce is his fault, and he will believe that something he has done, or something that he hasn't done he should have, caused his parents to separate.

Frequently during their arguments, Rachel accused Michael of causing the divorce because he was "such a brat and makes mother upset."

When children believe they are at fault for their parents divorce, they also believe that it is their responsibility to get mom and dad back together again. They will do whatever they can think of to accomplish that task. Some children become "super-kids" to relieve the pressure of an overburdened parent. Other children become demons, attempting to make it impossible for one parent to cope with them.

The second primary need is honesty. Children need the truth. They need the truth not only about reasons for divorce, but also about what it feels like for their parents to be going through divorce. A child's security comes from his ability to trust. If he recognizes that his parents are not being truthful or they are attempting to mislead him or are acting in ways that are different from what they are telling him, then that child's security is at risk. Honesty is basic for the child to have any sense that he will be able to survive his parents' divorce.

Only when we are honest with our children will they be honest with us. Children need to talk about their feelings, but they will be open about them only if parents take the lead.

The third primary need of children of divorce is modeling. Children whose parents go through divorce are almost never prepared for what that divorce is going to mean to them. They need to follow the lead of their parents in dealing appropriately with the emotional and psychological responses that they have to the reality of divorce. Too often, adults themselves are not able to appropriately process all the emotional stresses that are part of divorce. But, we must be aware that our children imitate us whether we are good models or bad. We need to teach children how to deal with crises like divorce, how to deal with loss, how to deal with a fear of abandonment. All these things we as adults have experienced.

A group of parents were asked to make a list of all the things that they did to express their anger. Some of the things that they suggested were to yell or to strike out or use strong language. After they made their lists, they were also asked if they would allow their children to do the same things when they became angry. Very few parents could answer yes. What this lesson teaches is that if we will not allow our children to express their emotions in a way that we express those emotions- anger and guilt as well as fear and pain- -then we must learn to do things that we will allow them to, or allow them to do what

they see us doing.

The alternative for the child is to hold his feelings in, which too often will be expressed later in physical symptoms or emotional outbursts. If parents are unavailable or emotionally exhausted, children should be encouraged to seek out other adults who are good models and good listeners. Many school counselors in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School District have brought divorced children together in discussion groups to help them work

The fourth and perhaps most important need of children of divorce is affection. Parental love is the basis for self-esteem. If the child believes that he is loved by his parents, then he will believe himself to be a lovable and worthy human being. No one person can give another person all the affection that he requires.

Sometimes, divorced parents use their children to get the affection they are no longer getting from their spouse. This can be very damaging to the child. He may feel he has become an emotional crutch for his parent. Any feelings of split loyalty that the child already feels are compounded by this added burden. It is the duty of parents to meet the emotional needs of their children. Children must not be used to meet the emotional needs of a deprived parent.

The fifth primary need, and perhaps the most difficult to meet, is stability. Children need to minimize the change in their lives and to maximize the hope of survival through change. It is usually preferable, for instance, for children to remain in the marital home after the separation. To provide stability for our children, we need first to provide stability for ourselves, and that usually means to believe in our own ability to survive the divorce. When we begin to do things that express self-care, then and only then can we communicate our belief in a future stability for our children.

Drs. Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly note in their book, "Surviving The Break Up, How Children And Parents Cope With Divorce," that the children they studied over a five-year period after their parents' divorce were intensely aware of the adjustment patterns of both parents. They monitored the conflicts between their parents and kept close track of the visiting schedule with the non-custody parent. The rate of approval for their parents' divorce and their own sense of well-being after five years were dependent upon the child's ability to see the parents needs as different from his own and that the divorce had resulted in improvement in the life of one or both parents.

Remember that divorce cannot and does not end your responsibility as a parent. Both parents should make every attempt to play a vital part in the lives of their children. The way that you cope with your divorce will in large part determine how your children cope with it. Continuing conflict between you and your former spouse will interfere with your effectiveness as a parent. Divorce counseling that focuses on family

issues after divorce can help parents to restructure their relationship in ways that define their roles as parents who are former spouses.

The task of all parents whether married or divorced is not easy. All parents make mistakes, but if you have a good relationship with your children, and they trust in your love and guidance, they will grow through the divorce and will become .