



Newsletter of Stonebriar Counseling Associates

☐ Children of Divorce

Divorce is having a devastating impact on both adults and children. Over 1 million children in the United States experience parental divorce annually (Clarke, 1995). Although most children adapt well to this transition, approximately 20% to 25% develop mental health or adjustment problems twice the rate experienced by children from continuously married families (Hetherington et al., 1998). Meta-analyses of studies conducted between 1950 and 1999 indicated that children from divorced homes function more poorly than children from continuously married parents across a variety of domains, including academic achievement, social relations and conduct problems (Amato, 2001). They continue to be at risk for clinically significant mental health difficulties into adulthood (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Zill et al., 1993), are more likely to receive mental health services (Zill et al., 1993), and have a shorter life expectancy (Tucker et al., 1997) than those who grew up in two-parent families.

These divorces effectively cut one generation off from another. Children are reared without the presence of their father or mother. Children are often forced to take sides in the conflict. And, children often carry the scars of the conflict and frequently blame themselves for the divorce.

[So what is the long-term impact? Well, one demographer looking at this ominous trend of divorce and](#)

[reflecting on its impact, acknowledged:](#)

No one knows what effect divorce and remarriage will have on the children of the baby boom. A few decades ago, children of divorced parents were an oddity. Today they are the majority. The fact that divorce is the norm may make it easier for children to accept their parents' divorce. But what will it do to their marriages in the decades ahead? No one will know until it's too late to do anything about it (Russell, C., 1987).

In 1971, Judith Wallerstein began a study of sixty middle-class families in the midst of divorce. Her ongoing research has provided a longitudinal study of the long-term effects of divorce on parents and children. Interestingly enough, Judith Wallerstein had to revise her previous assumptions. The prevailing view at the time saw divorce as a brief crisis that would eventually resolve itself. Her second book, *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children a Decade After Divorce*, vividly illustrates the long-term psychological devastation (Wallerstein, 1989). Here are just a few of her findings in her study of the aftershocks of divorce:

- Three out of five children felt rejected by at least one parent.
- Five years after their parent's divorce, more than one-third of the children were doing markedly worse than they

had been before the divorce.

- Half grew up in settings in which the parents were warring with each other even after the divorce.
- One-third of the women and one-quarter of the men felt that life had been unfair, disappointing and lonely.

In essence, Wallerstein found that the emotional tremors register on the psychological Richter scale many years after the divorce. In addition to the emotional impact is the educational impact. Children growing up in broken homes do not do as well in school as children from stable families. One national study found an overall average of one lost year of education for children in single-parent families. (Klein, Sheila Fitzgerald, Beller, A., 1989). Divorce and remarriage adds another additional twist to modern families. Nearly half of all marriages in 1990 involved at least one person who had been down the aisle before, up from 31 percent in 1970 (Dunn, W., 1991). Indeed, changes in family structures complicate relationships. Divorce and remarriage shuffle family members together in difficult and awkward ways. Parental authority and communication become blurred and confused in these newly revised families. One commentator trying to get a linguistic handle on these arrangements called them "neo-nuclear" families ("Families: neo-nukes," *Research Alert*, 17 August 1990, 6.). Children

looking for stability are often insecure and frustrated. One futuristic commentator imagined this possible scenario:

On a spring afternoon, half a century from today, the Joneses are gathered to sing "Happy Birthday" to Junior. There's Dad and his third wife, Mom and her second husband, Junior's two half brothers from his father's first marriage, his six stepsisters from his mother's spouse's previous unions, 100-year-old Great Grandpa, all eight of Junior's current "grandparents," assorted aunts, uncles-in-law and stepcousins. While one robot scoops up the gift wrappings and another blows out the candles, Junior makes a wish ...that he didn't have so many relatives (U.S. News and World Report, 9 May 1983)

📌 Signs To Look For

Parents should be alert to signs of distress in their child or children. Young children may react to divorce by becoming more aggressive and uncooperative or withdrawing. Older children may feel deep sadness and loss. Their schoolwork may suffer and behavior problems are common. As teenagers and counselor or psychologist adults, children of divorce can have trouble with their own relationships and experience problems with self-esteem. Parents should consider a psychiatric evaluation for their child when they exhibit strong feelings of being:

- alone dealing with the losses
- torn between two parents or two households
- excluded

- isolated by feelings of guilt and anger
- unsure about what is right
- very uncomfortable with any member of the original family

In addition, if parents observe that the following signs are lasting or persistent, then they should consider a psychiatric evaluation for the child/family:

- child vents/directs anger upon a particular family member or openly resents a parent
- one of the parents suffers from great stress and is unable to help with the child's increased need
- a parent openly favors one of the children
- members of the family derive no enjoyment from usual pleasurable activities (i.e. learning, going to school, working, playing or being with friends and family)

Children will do best if they know that their mother and father will still be their parents and remain involved with them even though the marriage is ending and the parents won't live together. Long custody disputes or pressure on a child to "choose" sides can be particularly harmful for the youngster and can add to the damage of the divorce. Research shows that children do best when parents can cooperate on behalf of the child. Parents' ongoing commitment to the child's well-being is vital. If a child shows signs of distress, the family doctor or pediatrician can refer the parents to a qualified for evaluation and treatment. In addition, the counselor or

psychologist should meet with the parents to help them learn how to make the strain of the divorce easier on the entire family. Psychotherapy for the children of a divorce, and the divorcing parents, can be helpful.

📌 7 Tips to Protect Children of Divorce

(provided by David John Berndt, Ph.D.)

When a family finds itself in the middle of a separation or divorce, one of the first worries is "what about the children?" Research has shown that while divorce can be hard on children, its often the verbal fighting of the parents that most directly effects the children. A child's emotional impact depends on how well the parents are able to isolate them from these disruptions.

Many psychologists and other therapists have tips and suggestions on how best to help children at times like these. One organization that provides a very good pamphlet and other information is the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. Because parenting is a lifelong job, consider the following ideas as a way to help buffer children from the real and imagined problems they face during parental separation and or divorce:

First and foremost, parents should try to maintain consistency. Children going through separation and divorce need a lot of stability to anchor them during the stressful times of the early stages. Change as little as possible.

Encourage the parent not to alter the way they discipline and reward their child. Keep the routines the same (bedtimes, meals). Children feel safest when things are familiar.

Second- tough times are the best times to be more affectionate. A few extra hugs are just what the doctor ordered for times like these. It might be advantageous to not overdo this. But a little more affection can make a big difference to children who are feeling scared or lonely.

*Third-*As another precaution, it is equally important to avoid letting the children take care of their mom or dad. Many children try to act like adults and want to help and comfort their parents, who they can see are in more distress than usual. That is not their job. Its hard enough to be a child at times like these, so parents should not treat their child like an adult. Do the children a favor and keep the parental and child roles distinct and separate!

*Fourth-*help the children stay connected. Each parent should support their children's friendships and activities. Changing schools and day care is a bad idea, if it's possible to avoid it. Often schools will make a residency exception in cases of separation. Even if the move to a distant neighborhood and school district is a must, make an effort to have sleep-overs and play dates with their old friends while encouraging new friendships too.

Fifth- reassure the children about the basic necessities. Each child needs to hear that both parents still love them and that the problems aren't their fault.

Parents are often surprised to learn that when they fight about who gets to sleep where, the children worry that they too may have to sleep in the car! Children know when parents are feeling economically stressed, and even they become worried that there won't be enough food or clothes.

Sixth- spare the children exposure to fighting. Disagreements should be well out of earshot while realizing that kids are experts at listening in. It is imperative that parents not make their children take sides or be quizzed about what the other parent/ex-spouse is doing, or to act as a go between, or messenger when there is a disagreement.

Finally, one of the most important things parents can do for their children, is to take good care of themselves. Children need mom/dad now more than ever, to stay healthy. Eat, sleep, and exercise well. They should be careful not to isolate themselves. In fact, it would be physically and emotionally wholesome to spend time with old and new friends who can be supportive. If they start to feel overwhelmed, or if depression, anxiety, anger and such persist, they should then consider getting help from a therapist or support group. Family therapy can be helpful at a time like this. Working with divorced and divorcing families requires therapeutic boundaries different from those used in treating individuals and couples. The goals of the counselor are to help parents understand the change in their roles, to help them take personal responsibility rather than blaming the other parent, and to assist them in focusing on the needs of the child rather than their

marital anger. Divorce has the potential to produce bitterness, depression, and a lack of trust in people. It also has the potential to deepen the individual's relationship with God, which brings with it great blessings ([Psalm 37:4-6,9,11,18-19](#) ; [Matt. 5:3-10](#) ; [Philippians 2:1-2](#)). Both the children and their divorced parent will significantly benefit in realizing that God will not leave them alone in their suffering and that He is a source of comfort ([Matt. 5:4](#)), and healing ([Psalm 34:17-18](#)). It won't be an easy road, but there is solace in knowing that He suffers with those who are hurting in their loss. This is not what God intended for their life, but He can use suffering to pour love into them and produce deeper Christ-like character ([Rom. 5:1-5](#)). In addition, they are not going to change their ex-spouse now any more than in the previous marriage. Let go and let God ala the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.." Also, encourage the parent to focus on being an influence to their children toward God while in the home. Model the Christian walk and inoculate them. Spiritual inoculations present viewpoints that oppose anger, bitterness, and resentment that will help children combat spiritual attacks. Children who have one parent not living a Christian life will need inoculations to help them deal with an environment that is hostile to their growing faith. Finally, as counselors may we help those who are hurting to pray every day for the strength to walk in the light while introducing their children to Jesus at each and every opportunity. -4-

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Newsletter of Stonebriar Counseling Associates

From the desk of....

Bob Good



**Sexual Addiction Group Meeting
Tuesday Nights at 7:00 pm (SCA Office)**

One out of every two marriages today ends in divorce and many divorcing families include children. Parents who are getting a divorce are frequently worried about the effect the divorce will have on their children. During this difficult period, parents may be preoccupied with their own problems, but continue to be the most important people in their children's lives.

While parents may be devastated or relieved by the divorce, children are invariably frightened and confused by the threat to their security. Some parents feel so hurt or overwhelmed by the divorce that they may turn to the child for comfort or direction. Divorce can be misinterpreted by children unless parents tell them what is happening, how they are involved and not involved and what will happen to them.

Children often believe they have caused the conflict between their mother and father. Many children assume the responsibility for bringing their parents back together, sometimes by sacrificing themselves. Vulnerability to both physical and mental illnesses can originate in the traumatic loss of one or both parents through divorce. With care and attention, however, a family's strengths can be mobilized during a divorce, and children can be helped to deal constructively with the resolution of parental conflict.

Talking to children about a divorce is difficult. The following article can help both the child and parents with the challenge and stress of these conversations.

Sincerely,

Bob