

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

The child of divorce is no longer exceptional. In 1970, there were 7 million children under eighteen living in divorced homes. The one-parent home is becoming common.

This changing family picture will probably have a lasting influence on how divorce affects children. Certainly the stigma of divorce is a thing of the past, as most children have friends from broken homes. They are less likely to feel "different." But many child experts still argue that children are the real victims of divorce, that families should stay together "for the sake of the children."

(Divorce, then, is a painful bridge between two worlds, which takes most divorced persons about two years to transit.) One cannot just continue the same routine—the world of married couples has little room for the divorced. However, it seldom takes long to find new friends and new activities to fill the void. There is a vast community of the formerly married, who share their experiences and support each other.

(The divorced soon find there is no road map for successfully reaching fulfillment in a new life. Each person has to find his or her own way.) Almost everyone suffers from doubts and bitterness and loneliness at some point. As they panic, many people feel the divorce was a mistake. The problem of coping with less money spread over two households increases the anxiety. Still, most people eventually overcome these problems to make a new life, with new goals.

Explaining Divorce to Children

When parents separate, children can feel insecure until they are sure that they are still loved. Children often feel responsible for a divorce. Barbara Berson, co-author of *Survival Guide for the Suddenly Single*, writes: "It's up to you, the remaining parent, to handle these distressing feelings. In order to do this, (the first and most important thing you can give your child is THE

TRUTH... children need to know clearly that you and your husband were not fighting over them.) They need to be told the truth so that they can understand it.”

Divorce is a time when children have greater needs for reassurance, contact, comfort, stability, and love—and a time when parents have very little strength left to give. If parents are not careful, it becomes an emotional tug-of-war.

(Often it is the parents who hurt their children, by treating them as important pieces of property, pawns in a cruel game of “getting even.”) Ralph Ober, executive director of Parents Without Partners, the largest organization for single parents, writes that “the sad truth is that in the parental battle for favorable position, most adults ignore the rights of their children.”

Children’s Definitions of Divorce

These quotes, from kids asked to describe divorce, reveal their point of view:

* “I came from the time that they liked each other. It’s over now.”

* “Mommy cries a lot.”

* “You take turns between Mom and Dad.”

* “You pay your lawyers a lot of money to wreck your family.”

* “Judges are paid to decide things when no one else can.”

* “Lawyers take a lot of money from people.”

* “Once they got lawyers they stopped being friends, just like that.”

* “I don’t talk to them about my feelings much because they have so many problems of their own.”

* “We had to move. I miss my friends from my old school and my house.”

* “Judges shouldn’t scare people about not seeing each other anymore. It’s too scary.”

* “Judges should listen to kids. They aren’t as smart as grown-ups but they know the truth.”

It is clear that children understand what’s going on. They are alert to the conversations around them. After all, their lives depend on it. Their statements reflect the dominant themes for children of divorce: loss, loneliness, sadness, fear, anxiety and disruption. The overall reduction in the parents’ ability to take care of them and spend time with them is paramount. There is a direct correlation between the amount of conflict in the family and the depth and intensity of these emotions experienced by the child.

*“Tough times never last.
Tough people do.”*

Mike Utley, athlete with spinal cord injury

Your point of view determines your response and shapes your experience. If you resist change because it is threatening, your response will be protective and closed. When you define change as an opportunity, you are ready to openly embrace its possibilities.

As the pace of life accelerates, the generation gap widens. Grandparents often find these changes disappointing and painful. Our values may be called into question, and adaptation may require rethinking long-held beliefs and learning to accept family situations that do not fit our expectations. (On the other hand, grandparents, by virtue of experience and position, have a broader, more philosophical perspective on life.) We have an opportunity to be anchors for our family and bearers of our family’s values and heritage, no matter what its size, shape or color.

The Four Most Important Tasks of Grandparenting

In a world where affection and allegiance are often conditional, simply giving and receiving love is a great gift. In fact, giving love is a grandparent’s greatest offering. I have identified the four most important tasks

of grandparenting. There are important no matter the grandchild's age and they define our grandparent roles.

1. Unconditional love. We offer unconditional love, accepting the child "as is." Our belief in them fosters their belief in themselves.

2. Modeling a good life. We foretell the future for our children and grandchildren. When we live our lives with vitality and enthusiasm, we tell them that life is worthwhile, that the future is good.

3. Providing continuity. Grandparents provide a bridge between the past and the future. We inform grandchildren that they belong to something greater than themselves. They belong to a family with a history.

4. Providing stability and security. *"A family is a place where, when you go there, they have to let you in."* Grandparents provide security and a safety net for their children and grandchildren—and a helping hand when they fall, to enable positive risk-taking.

In these ways grandparents influence the future. We give our grandchildren roots into the past and wings to explore the world. We need to seek new ways to offer these gifts when there is divorce. The situation may be changed, but the needs for all of our offerings remain the same.

*When you aim for perfection,
you discover it is a moving target.*

Patch, Patch, Patch

This is how one grandmother described her role: "It's patch, patch, patch." I agree that's often the case. When family life is disrupted, grandparents end up with the job of smoothing things over, attempting to take up the slack or providing some moments of diversion. Patch, patch, patch sums up the position of many grandparents.

*They seem to go from one crisis to
another and I keep trying to help make
things better. It's discouraging, but
what can I do?"*

Grandchildren's Thoughts About Grandparents

We don't always know what to expect from our grandchildren, but here's how some third-graders answered the question, *What is a grandma and what is a grandpa?*

* "A grandmother is lady who has no children of her own. She likes other people's boys and girls."

* "A grandfather is a man grandmother. He goes for walks with the boys, and they talk about fishing and stuff like that."

* "Grandmas and grandpas don't have to do anything but to be there. They're old so they shouldn't plan hard or run. It is enough if they take us to the market where the wooden horse is, and have a lot of dimes ready. Or if they take us for walks, they should slow down past things like pretty leaves and caterpillars. They should never say 'hurry up.'"

* "Usually grandmothers are fat, but not too fat to tie your shoes. They wear glasses and funny underwear. They can take their teeth and gums off."

* "Grandmothers don't have to be smart. Only answer questions like 'Why isn't God married?' and 'How came dogs chase cats?'"

* "Grandfathers don't talk baby talk like visitors do, because it is hard to understand. When they read to us they don't skip or mind if it is the same story over again."

* "Everybody should try to have a grandmother and grandfather, especially if you don't have television, because **grandmothers and grandfathers are the only grownups who have time for us kids!**"

Tips for Communicating with Grandchildren

- * Let your grandchild know that you want to help.
- * Listen more than you talk.

- * Don't push a child to talk. Don't pry.
- * Without going into detail, express your own feelings honestly, "I feel very sad." This could give the child permission to express feelings.
- * Give permission for the expression of feelings. It's okay to try. It's okay to be mad. It's okay to have fun.
- * Tell them, "I am here for you." (Even when you're long-distance you can be available by phone, fax, email, tape-recorded conversations, or cards and letters.)

There are three of them now,
 Mother and two daughters
 One, golden with light –
 One dark with keen sight;
 And father has long since gone.

The mother does what she can.
 There's such struggle to keep unity.
 It seems a classic plight;
 A challenge of the century.

Anne Norberg

"If men do not keep on speaking terms with children, they cease to be men, and become merely machines for eating and for earning money."

--John Updike

"To cease to be loved is for the child practically synonymous with ceasing to live."

--Karl A. Menninger

"There were times when I struggled to stay in touch with my daughters from one hundred and ten miles away. I remember one phone call I made to them when they were about nine and eleven years old. My oldest answered, and right away she said, "Dad, we gotta go. There's a really good show on TV."

I was having a particularly bad day before that call. Now I was really upset. Crushed. I wanted to yell at her, to hurt both my daughters for not taking my feelings into account, again. But I got off the phone calmly, doing my best not to let them know how bad I felt.

My girls went happily back to the television. I sat alone in my apartment where I yelled out loud, "Why can't they ever appreciate me? How can they watch that stupid TV and be so selfish? I can't believe this! Don't they have any idea how much I do for them? Don't they care at all how hard I work to stay connected to them? Don't they know how hard this is for me?" Grow Up -- RTH

Getting Along with Your Children's Mother and Others

"Fathers face special challenges to their patience and strength after separation from their children. At times it may seem impossible to get along with your child's mom and others. But you can do so by being creative and flexible.

Getting along with others requires knowing when to push and when to let go. Many men were raised to fight for what they want, but sometimes, particularly in personal relationships, we achieve more by fighting less. We win by letting go of winning at all costs. That way we reach compromises that truly nurture us and our children."

An old oak tree is huge and strong, but there are even greater forces of nature around it, so the oak tree also bends under the fierce and powerful force of storms. Then it continues to grow as it nurtures and protects the young saplings beneath it. The majestic old oak tree lives long because it is strong—and flexible.

The better you handle your life, the better your child's life will be because you'll make more healthy and loving decisions. (Taking good care of yourself isn't selfish, it's practical. It's a way of loving your child.)

You may be in great emotional pain. Possibly you've said or done things to your children or their mother that you'd like to take back. There may be many things you'd

like to say but never have. Either way, you can't change the past. But you can change the future based on how you deal with life today.

Your relationship with your children and their mother has changed, but your life is not over. You decide how it goes now in spite of how often it may look like others control you. Ultimately, what you do to take care of yourself and make loving decisions has much more power than anything anyone else can do to you.

Evidence of Love

List all the things you personally have adopted as evidence of love. List all the things other people do that you have adopted as evidence of *not* being loved (for example, when someone is late or forgets your birthday).

Now make the same type of list for the kind of behavior that constitutes your love for your children: "If I really love my children, then I will behave in the following ways." For example, "Love may mean I love my children when I

1. Hug them.
2. Listen to what they have to say.
3. Treat them with the respect due to their age and understanding.
4. Involve them in deciding what happens in their lives (those things I control).
5. Am honest with them.
6. Am truthful with them.
7. Take time to find out and remember what is important to them, and then act accordingly to let them know I know.
8. Don't put them down.
9. Don't use them to get back at my former spouse.

10. Don't call them names.

11. Don't manipulate them to do what I want them to do.

12. Respect their lives as separate and distinct from mine, giving them the opportunity to make age-appropriate decisions for themselves.

"Most importantly, don't quiz your children about what takes place in the other parent's home. Your children love both of you, and feel a strong loyalty to each of you. When you question them about what happens in the other parent's home, they are likely to feel anxious and defensive and will avoid sharing information. Encourage your children to share what they want to, but avoid asking questions that raise stress levels and cause anxiety."

Stop and think about all aspects of your post-divorce behavior and its impact on your children. By putting your child's needs first, you can avoid conflicts that hurt your child, and you can support your child's healthy relationship with the other parent. If each parent takes the time and the responsibility to reduce conflict, you can encourage your children to develop a healthy adjustment to your divorce, and avoid the insecurities and traumas that some children of divorce experience.

Conflicts Between Parents Are Likely to Cause:

- * tension, anxiety, and regression
- * feelings of confusion and embarrassment
- * feelings of responsibility and self-blame in your kids
- * withdrawal or clinging behavior at transitions
- * long-term emotional and behavioral wounds
- * feelings of disillusionment, fear, insecurity, or vulnerability

- * temper tantrums, school problems, or self-destructive behaviors

You Can Ease Your Child's Transitions By:

- * promoting and supporting an atmosphere of cooperation and sharing with the other parent
- * periodically talking with your child about the schedule to see if she likes it
- * keeping the transfer of the children free of conflict
- * using your child's school or daycare as a buffer zone if you can't avoid conflict

Bill of Rights for Children Whose Parents are Divorced

Children have the right to:

Know the truth about your divorce, with simple explanations!

Be protected from the parental warfare!

Develop and maintain an independent relationship with each parent!

Be free from having to take sides with, defend, or denigrate either parent!

Be free of responsibility for having caused the divorce!

Be reassured that they are not to blame!

Be free from having to take over parental responsibilities! A child can't become the "man of the house" or the "little mother"!

Expect that both parents will follow through with the parenting plan and honor specific commitments for scheduled time with their child!

Expect that both parents will inform each other about medical, dental, education and legal matters concerning the child!

Receive love, guidance, patience, understanding, and limits from their parents!

Spend time with each parent, regardless of financial support!

Be financially supported by both parents, regardless of how much time is spent with either parent!

Maintain privacy when talking to either parent on the telephone!

Have a personal sleeping area and space for possessions in each parent's home!

Participate in age-appropriate activities so long as those activities do not significantly impair their relationship with either parent!

Avoid being told the painful details of their parents' legal proceedings!

Avoid being made to feel guilty for loving both parents!

Avoid making the custody / visitation decisions!

Avoid being cross-examined by one parent after spending time with the other parent!

Not to be used as a messenger or spy between the parents!

Not to be asked to keep secrets from the other parent!

Things to Remember

Responsible parenting includes:

- * acknowledging that you make mistakes as parents
- * ignoring invalid criticism from the other parent
- * communicating with your child about his feelings
- * paying attention to your own parenting and attempting to improve it
- * avoiding blame of the other parent
- * being a parent more than a friend.

Healthy discipline includes:

- * maintaining reasonable rules and setting responsible limits
- * using natural consequences rather than punishments
- * teaching and modeling conflict resolution skills
- * encouraging healthy structures in your home
- * expressing your love to your child
- * avoiding your child's blackmail
- * remaining flexible and avoiding power struggles with your child.