

Children's reactions to parental separation and divorce

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Separation and divorce are painful processes that disrupt the lives of Canadian families. A large body of research has mapped out the common reactions to divorce, and identified ways to ease this painful process. For the majority of children who experience the dissolution of their parents' marriage, the effects are modest and relatively short-lived (1). Within two years of a separation, the majority of parents regain their equilibrium, establish polite but distant communication with their ex-partner, and their children, in turn, adapt to the new living arrangements. Nevertheless, most children report painful feelings about their parents' divorce, and a significant minority of children suffer extended and prolonged symptomatology related to parental divorce that may include both internalizing and externalizing problems (2).

RESOLVING CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTS

Parental conflict before, during and after a divorce has harmful effects on children (1). However, there is a clear consensus among researchers and clinicians that the child's best interests are served by maintaining a relationship with both parents, except in cases of severe marital conflict and abuse (2). Unfortunately, many fathers who face a bitter relationship with their former partner simply drop out of their children's lives. If that happens, children may suffer the double disadvantages of the psychological loss of a parent, and the loss of financial support. A key challenge that faces divorcing parents is, therefore, how to establish a new co-parental relationship with a former marital partner. Experts advise parents to set aside their own negative feelings, and develop a collaborative and cooperative business-type relationship with the person who they may consider to be the source of great personal distress. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the benefits for children and parents of alternatives to the adversarial legal system in the resolution of disputes about shared parenting after divorce; alternatives

include mediation and assessment services (3). Valuable information regarding mediation services is available from Family Mediation Canada*.

Parents often seek the advice of health care professionals about the timing of their divorce, and wonder whether there is an age at which children are immune to the negative effects of parental separation. Children of *all* ages are sensitive to parental divorce; their reactions are expressed in ways consistent with their developmental stage (2). Moreover, children are sensitive to all parental conflict, including suppressed, polite hostility (4). Parents should be reassured by the research finding that children are also sensitive to the resolution of conflict. Even very young children are aware that a dispute has been resolved. Furthermore, if children have the opportunity to witness the resolution of problems, they also benefit by learning important problem-solving skills. Consequently, the parents' dilemma is not the timing of the divorce, but *how to resolve conflict with their partner whether they stay together or separate*. Mental health professionals play an important role in helping parents develop a new co-parental relationship. Parents must learn to establish new boundaries between themselves and the person with whom they were intimate. They must develop effective communication and problem-solving skills.

CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Children who have experienced their parents' divorce display a range of emotional and behavioural reactions in the months following the event. Following their parents' separation, children may regress, display anxiety and depressive symptoms, appear more irritable, demanding and noncompliant, and experience problems in social relationships and school performance (5). Parents often feel troubled by and unprepared for their children's reactions to a separation and divorce. Children need to know that they are not responsible for the separation, that they

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are loved by both parents, and that their needs will be met. Children's expression of distress differs from that of adults. For example, compared with adults, children may be more open to communication through books, workbooks, stories, play and drawings (6). Parents must achieve a balance between acknowledging and accepting the expression of negative feelings on the one hand, and providing clear, consistent rules and structure on the other.

DIFFERENT CUSTODY ARRANGEMENTS

After a separation, parents must decide about their children's living arrangements and parental roles. Joint physical custody occurs when both parents share parenting decisions, and the child lives not more than 60% and not less than 40% of the time with each parent. Joint legal custody occurs when both parents retain rights to make parenting decisions; however, the child may live primarily with one parent. Sole legal custody occurs when one parent loses parental rights to make decisions, but still has parental obligations to support the child financially. Sole legal custody may be appropriate if one parent has shown a gross inability to parent or is abusive toward the other parent. Joint physical custody may present the best or worst of all worlds. It appears to be most successful when parents have a fundamental respect for one another, communicate in a clear fashion about their children's needs, can afford to live in the same school district, and are able to provide the child with two sets of essentials so that the child is not burdened by carrying many possessions from home to home. Joint physical custody may be a nightmare of tense transitions for the child whose parents have a conflictual relationship.

PARENTS' NEEDS

During the divorce process, adults experience a roller coaster of emotions to which their children are extremely sensitive. It is crucial that parents avoid overburdening a child with their own unhappiness or irritability. Furthermore, during the transition period of separation and divorce, the parenting skills of adults are at a low ebb. Unfortunately, at a time when children especially need support, warmth and firm, consistent control, many parents are least equipped to provide it (2). Parents are encouraged to activate their adult support systems and, if necessary, to seek professional help in their new parenting roles. Seeing a parent coping well with the challenges of divorce may alleviate children's sense of burden or responsibility, and provide an effective model for handling distress. Problem-solving interventions for parents are effective in helping them cope with divorce. Children's groups show some positive effects, but when recovering from divorce, children take their lead from their parents – if the parents are functioning well, the child is more likely to do well. Thus, interventions focused uniquely on children may be of limited usefulness (7).

SHARED PARENTING

Although divorcing partners debate the fairness of how much time children spend with one parent compared with the other, the quality of the parent-child relationship is more important than any ratio of time spent with parents. The importance of the child's relationship with both parents, and the value of being nurtured by both parents, cannot be overemphasized. Each parent brings unique qualities to the parent-child relationship, and the child's life is enriched by involvement with parents with differing styles, backgrounds and values. The challenge for divorcing partners is to develop a new relationship that is focused on shared parenting. Children benefit from the same kind of parenting whether their parents live in one household or two (ie, they benefit from warmth and structure) (2).

Several strategies can be helpful to parents who adopt a shared parenting role. Children benefit when there is regular communication between parents that facilitates the exchange of information regarding the child. For parents who find verbal interaction with one another difficult, this may take the form of a communication book or e-mail messages. Additionally, parents are encouraged to view their parenting plans with flexibility by recognizing that their arrangements will require adaptation and revision as their children grow older and circumstances change.

CONCLUSION

For the majority of families, separation and divorce provoke a time of crisis and destabilization. Yet, research demonstrates that after an initial period of distress, most adults and children are able to adapt effectively to new family structures and dynamics. Health care professionals are well placed to assist families in making the adjustment to a new set of demands and challenges. Parents are typically concerned about how divorce may affect their children; thus, it can be very reassuring for them to learn about the common reactions that children have to divorce, and to learn that strengthening their own support systems, developing a nonadversarial co-parenting relationship and maintaining a quality parent-child relationship will help their child adapt.

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