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Caring for Children and Their Feelings - After Divorce Maurie D. Pressman, MD

Sometimes relations become so intolerable that parents must take the drastic step of separating and then divorcing. It is always a troublesome and hurting thing, for all concerned. Sometimes, however, it is the best that can be done.

In the meantime, what about the children?

Love is the prevailing theme. If, the interest of the child is central to both parents of the divorce, then love will prevail. This means, that in spite of separation, they will do everything they can to present a united front. They will refrain from criticizing the other in front of the child, or demanding split loyalty. I have a patient, now an adult, who remembers with agony, the feeling of guilt in having to confess love and preference to each of the parents, feeling that this is a desertion of the other. That is always tormenting to the child, and all the more so since (as was true of my patient) there is also a promised reward for preferring one parent over the other. This creates conflict that remains as a scar and an inflammation, often in the hidden recesses of their mind. Such conflict can be alleviated when the divorced couple supports each other despite the separation. There are certain ages of the child which are crucial - in which the child is particularly vulnerable. And there are certain conditions that lead to vulnerability.

The age of three is a time of heightened separation anxiety. At that time the child has finally formed a complete image of himself or herself, a complete identity, but it is still unstable, and depends on attachment to the parent. Therefore separation at this age becomes of momentous importance. What to do about it? Talk to them, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts, feelings and fears. Then you will be able to support them better. Give the child as much time as possible, despite the separation of the parents.

Age five is a difficult one. Why? Children become romantic (in a sense) at that time, practicing romance and love with the parent of the opposite sex. This is the famed

Oedipus complex and it is a real thing. At that time, the boy learns how to become a young man by loving his mother in a young manly way - and he has rivalrous feelings toward his father. I remember that well from my own childhood, and it was inflamed by a mother who loved me too much. Shortly later I displaced that to a protective attitude toward my young girlfriend. This was (as it usually is) a practice session for later love and enduring love union. A young boy's rivalry with his father inspires guilt and a certain amount of fear of his father - but is mitigated by the fact that he also loves him. Nowadays there is so much expressed tenderness between father and child, something very different from some generations ago - and it is a good thing. What ever conflict is inspired by this developmental period becomes all the more agitated by losing one of the parents. How can it be mitigated? By each of the parents being as steady as possible, and the mother as supporting of the father in the child's eyes, as possible. With the girl - She is very much devoted to her father at the age of five or six, and in this way, she learns how to love the man of her future. She misses her father. She feels rivalrous with her mother. Thus in her own way she struggles with a conflict that is very similar to the boy's. But again, all this can be helped and healed and assisted when the educated love of both parents surrounds the child, despite their separation.

Adolescence is another time of great turmoil in the life of any of us. When the parents separate, there is a greater strain on the development of the child. Again, how can it be mitigated, helped and healed? By united love and central interest for the child, despite the separation. Their messages become messages of support rather than bitterness and derision. That is a true act of love for the child. As in any growing plant or any growing organism, the younger the organism, the more open to danger is the living being. This kind of knowledge of consistent love and support, and messages of being united in the love of the child, despite the pain of the separation, is a highly supporting thing, helping the child to move forward in his or her growth and development.

And What About The Parents?

They are not to be forgotten. They have endured heartbreak and strain and whatever else during the separation and divorce. There are cases of separation and divorce, wherein the partners remain very good friends. That's healing for all concerned. I've known, as my book on Twin Souls has circulated, and people have called to speak of their twin soul adventures, - I have known of couples who have had a very happy ending. I have known others in which there is a bitter period on the way to resolution. And so it is, too, with all separation and divorce. Divorce can be friendly, with each partner recognizing that what used to be is no longer, and that there is a future ahead, in other ways. This is a good thing for them and for the children. There are, of course, other situations in which separation becomes a bitter thing. That is something with which to contend. Why? Because there is the great need to protect the children from repercussions of the bitterness and hurt that a parent may endure. But it is also it is a good thing for the personal growth of the parents. Developing into real maturity comes when we allow our feelings, are able to observe them, and finally transcend them and

put them in their place - always using them for a better purpose. That may be easily said, and difficultly done, but it is possible, and it is the royal road to growth and ultimately greater happiness.

And what about the loneliness of the parents? The loneliness for the child who is no longer a full time child, or the loneliness of being alone - starting a new life - and the new, mysterious and frightening world. These, too, are challenges to be met and overcome. As in all cases, since we are group beings, herd animals, it is good to surround ourselves with a good support system, - good human beings. Bring in close family, close friends, or perhaps another love, another partner who has been well-tested.

In line with helping with the hurt and bitterness that often occurs, and that may be harmful to all concerned, - mediation by a mediation attorney is a very good thing. This is really a psychological and psychotherapeutic event. And if it becomes necessary, or advisable, conjoint therapy with a counselor is also a good thing. I have seen so many instances in which silence creates an abyss. Each member stands on a cliff, retreating behind the separation, nursing and nourishing his or her own ideas. They become more and more inflamed. Each member becomes more and more self-righteous, and more harmful to the other. This cleft can hopefully and happily be overcome by discussions which are mediated by an attorney or a professional counselor. Then a bridge of understanding can be built.