

STEPPING BACK FROM ANGER

Every year, more than 1 million American couples get divorced. For those men and women, it is often the most grueling, emotionally exhausting, and expensive experience they will ever have.

For their children, it can be even worse.

Imagine you are six, and suddenly the only people you have ever relied on for food, shelter, and love are at each other's throats. In your young mind, you conclude that you are the cause of their anger, and that you might get lost in the shuffle. Before you know it, you think to yourself, there won't be anybody left to scare off the closet monsters.

To make matters worse, you often find yourself alone in your anguish, as the two people you usually go to for solace - your parents - are too wrapped up in their own anger and grief to be of much help.

It is unsettling, to say the least.

As parents, it is not enough to assume that your children will bounce back once the legal machinations of divorce are through. Though many adults find their post-divorce lives are vastly better than their pre-divorce lives, for many children, that is not the case.

Divorce makes its mark on children both in the short-term and the long-term. Young children whose parents are divorcing often suffer from depression, sleep disorders, loss of self-esteem, poor academic performance, behavioral regression, and a host of other physical and emotional disorders.

Long after the divorce is final, children of divorce often have trouble entering into committed relationships of their own, fearing their relationships will end as their parents' did.

In addition, a Princeton University study showed that children who live apart from one of their parents are more likely to drop out of school, become idle (neither be in school nor have a job), and have a child before reaching 20, than children who live with both parents. Other studies have made similar findings, concluding that the effects of divorce on children are pervasive and insidious. These sad facts make it imperative that divorcing parents put their children before their legal battles. This often means that two people who find it difficult to be in the same room without screaming at each other will have to calmly, deliberately, and most of all, lovingly, make joint decisions about their children's well-being.

While it may mean suppressing their anger at a cheating or neglectful spouse, the winner, in the long run, is the children.

The stakes are obviously quite high.

Roughly one-third of the children of divorce lose contact with one of their parents, depriving them of years of adult guidance, support and love. But even many of those who remain in touch with both parents are not any better off, as they continue to be tormented for years by their parents' continual arguing.

And the longer the parental conflict continues, the more serious is the psychological damage to the child. Many children respond to such stress by turning off their feelings and walling up their emotions. Those children are not only deprived of the joys of childhood, but they often find themselves emotionally adrift as adults.

It's important for parents to remember that their actions during their divorce can have long-term consequences they might not intend. A mother who forbids her daughter from seeing her adulterous father, for instance, is laying the groundwork for her daughter to be distrusting of all men, thus potentially sabotaging the child's intimate adult relationships.

Parents must also realize that children often interpret anger between spouses as anger at the children. That is because children are aware, even at an early age, that they are "part mommy" and "part daddy." When divorcing couples disparage each other in their children's presence, their developing self-esteem can take a battering.

Though divorce is never easy on children, such crises are often opportunities in disguise. Because a child's emotional health after his parents' divorce is so dependent on his parents' behavior during the divorce, the separation process is a good time for parents to reflect on their children's well-being and, if necessary, seek out professional help for themselves and their children.

It may even be necessary for children to spend some time alone with a counselor who might detect hidden messages in a child's artwork or storytelling.

Avoiding a custody fight is one of the most important things parents can do to ensure their children's well-being after divorce. But even children whose parents are not fighting over custody can also be wounded by the anger being vented between both parents, and should be spared from that as much as possible.

(See Ten Tips for Divorcing Parents and Children's Bill of Rights.)

Helping children heal begins before any legal papers are filed, with how and when parents tell their children about their decision to break up.

The first words children hear about the divorce should be from their parents, as soon after the decision is made as possible. It is best not to wait until one parent has already moved out of the house.

Ideally, both parents should be there when the children are told. If the children are roughly the same age, they should be told at the same time. If there is a wide age difference, it can be useful to tell them together, and then have separate meetings with the children individually, adapting each explanation to each child's level of understanding.

When informing children of an impending divorce, parents should not divulge such details as infidelity or sexual deprivation, and they should not blame one parent or another. One possible approach is to present the divorce as a solution to the family's problems, an end to the fighting and tension that have filled the home with anger.

Honesty is a crucial element in informing children of the split. They should be told that their lives will change, and that some things, like spending time with the parent they're not living with most of the time, will be harder.

Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings, either with their parents, their friends, or a counselor.

It is best that parents not ask their children to choose with which parent they would like to live. If they have an opinion on the matter, it will likely come out unprompted. If they do not, they should not be put in a position of choosing between one parent and another.

One custody option to consider is joint conservatorship or joint custody (depending on the state). It allows both parents an equal say in decision-making on the child's behalf, even if physical custody of the child is not 50/50.

Although sharing parenthood so intimately with someone a parent no longer shares a marriage can be difficult, it is one of the best ways parents can show their love for their child.

Most children - in fact, most adults - still dream of being part of a Rockwellian family, with a mommy and a daddy, several happy children, and a dog, all living blissfully under one roof. But as the American divorce rate skyrockets, that dream is becoming a reality for fewer and fewer families.

In its place, for both parents and children, are opportunities. By stepping back from their own anger, divorcing parents can move closer to what should be a common goal for their children - maintaining a nurturing environment and minimizing the potentially traumatic byproducts of the so-called "broken home."

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