



Counselor Connection

NOVEMBER 10, 2009

BY MARCI PAYNE, MA, LPC

Divorcing Families

For the past 50 years, divorce is more common than death to disrupt a marriage. Growing up in a stable, two-parent family is becoming less common. And, one in two children will grow up in a one-parent family for at least part of their life.

A child's acute symptoms in reaction to a parental divorce is one of the most common reasons parents consult a mental health professional. It may take 1-3 years for each family member's functioning to return to pre-divorce levels. Yet, in other families, parents may begin transmitting the patterns of conflict and cutoff to their children; thus more chronic symptoms develop. So, how do parents help their kids adapt to divorce, while buffering them from ongoing conflict and emotional cutoff?

Know that children's symptoms are a sign that they are experiencing stress and/or trying to regulate their feelings. Not having mom or dad at home, holidays, special occasions; getting used to a new house, bedroom, or school are all changes that children may be adapting to in a brief amount of time after a parental divorce. Children's symptoms reflect their age and developmental level. The following acute symptoms may be exhibited by children in divorcing families (from younger to older children): regressed behavior, self-blame, sadness, taking sides, embarrassment, sexual promiscuity, excessive drug use, poor grades. Continue parenting with love and limits during this time, and know when to seek professional consultation for your own divorce recovery.

The following are my thoughts on what parents can do to help kids adapt to their divorcing family:

Separate parent and children feelings: Legal divorce isn't the same as emotional divorce. A parents' reaction to the divorce or to the spouse may continue for years after the divorce is final. There is typically one spouse not wanting the divorce, and this spouse may experience a range of feelings. Although children will have emotional responses to the divorcing family, don't assume they are the same as parental feelings.

Recognize own part in divorce process: While the spouse who initiates the legal divorce process is responsible for his or her decision, both spouses are responsible for the condition of their marriage. The more each parent is able to take a look at their own functioning (both pre- and post-divorce), the less likely the kids will be caught in the middle of the parental problems. This may also include looking at how

Receive free, monthly psychological information, resources, & updates on my services:

Subscribe to my mailing list at:
info@marcipayne.com

Newsletter Spotlight:

1. *Divorcing Families*
2. *Divorce Recovery Resources*
3. *Survey Results*

**Marci Payne, MA,
Licensed Professional
Counselor**

**19401 E. 40 Hwy,
Suite 140**

**Independence, MO
64055**

816-373-6761

info@marcipayne.com

I'm on the Web!

www.marcipayne.com

To remove your name
from my mailing list,
send unsubscribe to
info@marcipayne.com

© Copyright, 2009

Marci Payne, MA, LPC

one functioned in past family relationships.

Minimize post-divorce cutoff: It used to be that mother's were granted custody in the majority of divorcing families. This left children more emotionally distant from their fathers and the paternal extended family. Joint custody was a legal attempt to minimize this cutoff, yet I think emotional cutoff can still exist. The child may still feel more connected to one parent. Or, the child may eventually disconnect from both parents if the post-divorce conflict is very intense. The parent may also avoid children indirectly due to intense post-divorce, parental conflict. When conflict and anxiety is high, it is natural to want to distance oneself. It is challenging yet rewarding to take a look at how to manage your reactions without posturing (criticism, blame, pressuring) or distancing from your ex-spouse.

Work on de-traingulating: Identify who owns the problem. Coach children how to stay out of the middle of parental conflict. If the problem is between the parents, then teach kids how to say, "that's between you and mom (or dad)." Kids will try to mediate their parents' conflicts or may be invited to be messengers of information. On the other hand, children may use the conflict in attempt to get what they want or get out of trouble. Coach children to communicate directly with the parent they are complaining about (as long as they are safe). In turn, don't be the messenger for your children's conflict with your ex-spouse.

The factors that contribute to divorce and child symptoms are complex. In general, parents who can keep the family decisions out of the court system will buffer children from the effects of post-divorce conflict. Conflicts regarding the children may be the most detrimental to children's functioning after divorce. Attempts to help children cope without concurrent change among parents will have little impact. The more parents can work toward open parental interactions and cooperative decision making, the better the children will adapt to the changes in the family.

Divorce Recovery Resources:

Child-Focused Divorce by Edward Beal (for mental health professionals: found in [Clinical Applications of Bowen Family Systems Theory](#))

Collaborative Divorce: The Revolutionary New Way to Restructure Your Family, Resolve Legal Issues, and Move on with Your Life by Tesler & Thompson (book for parents)

Cooperative Co-Parenting by Marci Payne, MA, LPC:
<http://www.marcipayne.com/testimonials.html>

Divorce Care (Divorce Recovery Support Groups): www.divorcecare.com

Divorce is Not the End of the World by Zoe & Evan Stern (written by teens for school-age children)

Please Come Home by Doris Sandford (children's book for preschool-age)

To schedule a consultation or presentation, call 816-373-6761 (ext 2).

Survey Results & more...



1. **Survey Results:** I want to thank those of you who completed my Newsletter & Services Survey at survey monkey. The following are the topics that you want more information on: 1) Self-confidence, 2) Anxiety/Stress, 3) Thoughts/Feelings, 4) Parenting, and 5) Marriage/Family. I will be including these topics in the monthly newsletters through 2009. Thank you for your individual comments, as your feedback is always welcome.
2. **Online Networking:** I am not accepting "friend" requests from former or current clients/parents on Facebook. I won't be able to ensure confidentiality on the FB network. However, I have created a profile with LinkedIn, a professional internet networking site, (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/marcipayne>) where you can view my past work and educational experience as well as recommendations. Joining my "network" would mean your name & profile would be viewed by others in my network.
3. **Aetna Provider Status:** I have been informed that I am in the final stages of contracting with Aetna. If you have been waiting to use your Aetna EAP, HMO, or PPO with me, check back in a week.
4. **Wellspring Website:** A previous resource that I introduced in my newsletter now has a website: www.wellspringkc.org (offering affordable, faith-based counseling in Lee's Summit, MO)

