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The Impact of Divorce on Young Children and Adolescents

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In response to my blog about single parenting adolescents, I received this email request: "I was wondering if you could address the effects of divorce on very small children."

What I can do is try to distinguish some general ways children (up through about age 8 or 9) often react to parental divorce in contrast to how adolescents (beginning around ages 9 - 13) often respond. Understand that I am talking here about tendencies, not certainties.

Divorce introduces a massive change into the life of a boy or girl no matter what the age. Witnessing loss of love between parents, having parents break their marriage commitment, adjusting to going back and forth between two different households, and the daily absence of one parent while living with the other, all create a challenging new family circumstance in which to live. In the personal history of the boy or girl, parental divorce is a watershed event. Life that follows is significantly changed from how life was before.

Somewhat different responses to this painful turn of events occur if the boy or girl is still in childhood or has entered adolescence. Basically, divorce tends to intensify the child's dependence and it tends to accelerate the adolescent's independence; it often elicits a more regressive response in the child and a more aggressive response in the adolescent. Consider why this variation may be so.

The child's world is a dependent one, closely connected to parents who are favored companions, heavily reliant on parental care, with family the major locus of one's social life. The adolescent world is a more independent one, more separated and distant from parents, more self-sufficient, where friends have become favored companions, and where the major locus of one's social life now extends outside of family into a larger world of life experience.

For the young child, divorce shakes trust in dependency on parents who now behave in an extremely undependable way. They surgically divide the family unit into two different households between which the child must learn to transit back and forth, for a while creating unfamiliarity, instability, and insecurity, never being able to be with one parent without having to be apart from the other.

Convincing a young child of the permanence of divorce can be hard when his intense longing fantasizes that somehow, some way, mom and dad will be living back together again someday. He relies on wishful thinking to help allay the pain of

loss, holding onto hope for a parental reunion much longer than does the adolescent who is quicker to accept the finality of this unwelcome family change. Thus parents who put in a joint presence at special family celebrations and holiday events to recreate family closeness for the child only feed the child's fantasy and delay his adjustment.

The dependent child's short term reaction to divorce can be an anxious one. So much is different, new, unpredictable, and unknown that life becomes filled with scary questions? "What is going to happen to next?" "Who will take care of me?" "If my parents can lose for each other, can they lose love for me?" "With one parent moving out, what if I lose the other too?" Answering such worry questions with worst fears, the child's response can be regressive.

By reverting to a former way of functioning, more parental care-taking may be forthcoming. There can be separation anxieties, crying at bed times, breaking toilet training, bed-wetting, clinging, whining, tantrums, and temporary loss of established self-care skills, all of which can compel parental attention.

The child wants to feel more connected in a family situation where a major disconnection has occurred. Regression to earlier dependency can partly be an effort to elicit parental concern, bringing them close when divorce has pulled each of them further away - the resident parent now busier and more preoccupied, the absent parent simply less available because of being less around.

The more independent-minded adolescent tends to deal more aggressively to divorce, often reacting in a mad, rebellious way, more resolved to disregard family discipline and take care of himself since parents have failed to keep commitments to family that were originally made.

Where the child may have tried to get parents back, the adolescent may try to get back at parents. Where the child felt grief, the adolescence has a grievance. "If they can't be trusted to stay together and take care of the family, then I need to start relying more on myself." "If they can break their marriage and put themselves first, then I can put myself first too." "If they don't mind hurting me, then I can I don't mind hurting them."

Now the adolescent can act aggressively to take control of his life by behaving even more distantly and defiantly, more determined to live his life his way, more dedicated to his self-interest than before. He feels increasingly autonomous in a family situation that feels disconnected. He now feels more impelled and entitled to act on his own.

For the parent who divorces with an adolescent, the young person's increased dedication to self-interest must be harnessed by insisting on increased responsibility as more separation and independence from family occurs.

For the parent who divorces with a child, the priority is establishing a sense of family order and predictability. This means observing the three R's required to restore a child's trust in security, familiarity, and dependency - Routines, Rituals, and Reassurance.

Thus parents establish household and visitation Routines so the child knows what to expect. They allow the child to create Rituals to feel more in control of her life. And they provide continual Reassurance that the parents are as lovingly connected to the child as ever, and are committed to the making this new family arrangement work.

For more about the impact of divorce on children, see my book, "The Everything® Parents Guide to Children and Divorce. More information at: www.carlpickhardt.com

Next week's entry: Adolescence and Holiday Safety

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