

Spare the Children: The Emotional Impact of Separation and Divorce

For some, divorce can result in greater stress, anger and emotional pain than the death of a spouse. Separation and divorce require innumerable life adjustments for both parties, including residential changes, new financial realities, employment adjustments and social transitions. Children face similar transitional adjustments such as, coping with the separation from each of their parents, new homes, different rooms, and possibly new neighborhoods, schools, daycare arrangements, financial status, extra curricular activities and friends. Sometimes a parent's new partners and his or her children are thrown into the mix.

Neither parents nor children have been equipped to manage the stress that results from these transitions and typically the first few years can be stressful. However, often this stress can result in distress for both parents and children. If you factor in high conflict between parents, these stresses can contribute to distress and mental health challenges. This article considers the way in which highly conflicted families contribute to the distress and mental health challenges confronting children.

Debbie and Phil have one child and actually separated before he was born. Debbie claims she didn't know what she was thinking to have become involved with Phil and firmly believes his involvement with their son will be detrimental to him. Phil maintains Debbie neglects their son and only wants custody of him so he can't have him. Their child, Andy, now seven, has never been able to celebrate a birthday with both parents. Christmas, birthdays, mother's and father's days are dreaded events because neither parent ensures Andy has a gift to give the other parent to mark these special occasions. Andy eventually quit baseball when his parents made a spectacle of themselves and humiliated him at every game when they fought over whose turn it was to go into the dressing room with him.

As a result of his parents' refusal to communicate with each other, Andy was left at the bus stop, time and time again wondering if either of them would know to pick him up. Acting out at home and demonstrating poor adjustment at school, his parents agreed to send him for therapy. They couldn't agree on which therapist, who would be responsible for payment of the fees, how he would get to therapy and who would make his appointments. When he finally did get to see the therapist last year, the therapist wondered how she could effect change when the source of Andy's maladjustment, his parents' conflict, had not been addressed.

Children of highly conflicted separation and divorce suffer higher rates of psychological problems.¹ These children suffer significantly higher rates of health and physical disorders, emotional difficulties, mental health disorders, accidents, alcohol and substance abuse,

¹ Emery R.E. "Changing the Rules for Determining Child Custody in Divorce Cases" (1999) 6 *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*. 323-327.

decreased self-esteem and increased rates of suicide.² The negative outcomes of separation and divorce are not a result of the divorce itself, but more strongly associated with high conflict. It is not unusual for parents to experience higher rates of conflict initially when emotions are raw and stress is high, and most parents overcome this initial hostility.³ By the sixth year of separation 80% of parents have recovered from their initial hostilities. However, 20 to 25% of parents continue to be engaged in conflictual behaviours after 6 years.⁴ Conflict can range from the occasional verbal quarrel in the presence of the children to loud, threatening verbal altercations, to threats of violence, to physical violence between parents while the children look on.⁵

Take Mary Jo and Michael, who have been divorced for 6 years. They have two children Ashley, age 7 and Daryl age 9. Each time the children go from one home to another, their parents are engaged in heated verbal exchanges in which each berates and denigrates the other, threatens to limit access to the children, and seeks alliances with the children in an attempt to bolster their arguments. These parents are involved in continuous litigation, each firmly supported by their own extended families who also berate and denigrate their previous in-laws in front of the children. Neither Ashley nor Daryl can contact or speak of their other parent while visiting with the access parent. They are not permitted to bring a cherished toy or keepsake from house to house. While their parents have each become involved in new relationships, and each has a child of the new relationship, neither parent has met their children's' half siblings. Daryl complains his half sister fears and hates his mother even though they have never met. Clearly these children are caught in the middle of their parents' battleground.

Highly conflictual parents must carefully consider how their children perceive their situations. In the book, *The Co-Parenting Survival Guide: Letting Go of Conflict after a Difficult Divorce*, Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman discuss the dilemmas many children are confronted with upon the separation of their parents. Children experience immense loyalty issues as a result of their parents' conflict. These children struggle to love both parents knowing that each parent hates the other. Their love for both parents places these children in a loyalty bind making them feel they are betraying each of their parents. These children are also fear abandonment and rejection. A child may reason to his or herself, "if mommy could leave daddy, she could leave me also. Children can feel responsible for the separation, believing they could have prevented the ending of the marriage, particularly if the conflict surrounds them.

Jeremy, a ten year old boy is trying to cope with his parents constant bickering about him. Like many boys his age, Jeremy's priority is fun and excitement. Often his homework takes a back seat to his friends. His mom and dad bicker relentlessly about who should have been responsible to see his homework was completed over the weekend. Mom complains that when Jeremy comes home each weekend he has to rush to complete his homework. Dad complains

² Irwing, H., and Benjamin, M., *Family Mediation: Contemporary Issues* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).

³ Ahrons, C., *The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together when your Marriage Comes Apart* (Quill: New York, 1994).

⁴ Hetherington, E.M., and Kelly, H. *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

⁵ Barris, M., & Garriey, C., *Caught in the Middle: Protecting Children of High-Conflict Divorce* (New York: Lexington Books, 1994).

he sees so little of Jeremy he shouldn't have to spend his time making him do his homework. Poor Jeremy has concluded he is simply a selfish, inconsiderate child because if he had been a more conscientious student his parents would have little to argue about and likely wouldn't have separated. Jeremy's parents are too distracted by their conflict to consider the position they have put Jeremy in.

Separated and divorced parents can also fall into destructive patterns of behaviour as they face difficult readjustments and losses following separation. So distracted by their pain and suffering, some become depressed and others may turn to alcohol use. Many children take greater responsibilities for household tasks and the care of siblings to make up for the parental shortfall. These children may also begin to refuse to attend activities outside the home (including time with the other parent) or do not go to school as they feel it necessary to remain home to protect their parents from further self-destruction. Parents may be distracted by their own conflict or preoccupied by their own needs and fail to make necessary decisions on behalf of their children. Fighting for months on end about what activities the children should be in, whether the activities should be after school or on weekends and how the children will be transported to the activities can take precedent over actually signing them up for the activity and it's the child who loses out.

Finally, parents caught up in hatred toward one another are so intent on making things more difficult for each other they sabotage themselves along the way. Having lost any flexibility toward the other parent they fail to realize that they are both in the same situation with a common goal, the good of their child. Their inability to recognize this renders them incapable of helping one another out, further perpetuating the stress and isolation of single parenthood. Of course, the lack of flexibility does nothing to meet the needs of the children.

If you are separated or divorced, imagine your children at their wedding. Think about how your relationship with your ex-spouse will impact on this day, such as how you both might help pay for the ceremony (could you negotiate this yourselves), attending the ceremony together (will you be able to speak to each other), and your child's right to spend the day with both parents (will he or she be caught in a loyalty bind on the most important day in his or her life). Imagine how the day might play out if it is fraught with conflict. Separated and divorced parents need to think about the needs of their children. These parents can reduce the level of conflict in their relationship with some thought to the impact it has on their children and through professional intervention such as Mediation, Mediation/Arbitration, Parenting Coordination, or if absolutely necessary, a Custody and Access Assessment.

Endnotes