Personal practice

Guidance for divorcing parents

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Divorce is endemic in the Western world; in Britain one marriage in three ends in divorce, and in the United States the proportion is one in two. When their parents are divorced children are exposed to special dangers to their psychological development. The family is the main source of psychosocial elements essential for healthy development—love, nurture, control, and guidance—and is the environment in which personality and gender are moulded. Its breakdown, in depriving children of these, represents major stress. At the same time the parents' preoccupation with their conjugal struggles interferes with their ability to support their children in coming to terms with this and other stresses without psychological or social maladjustment. Most children show signs of their stress through anxiety, anger, irritability, depression, bodily complaints, and deterioration in academic performance during the year after divorce. About 30–40% suffer subsequently from enduring psychopathology or social maladjustment such as depression, aggressiveness, and lack of self discipline that leads to delinquency, promiscuity, alcoholism, or drug addiction. This proportion is two or three times more than the proportion that would be expected in children whose parents were in serious conflict but did not divorce.

Paediatricians who wish to reduce current suffering and future incapacity may seek to lower the intensity of the stress caused to children and help parents devote special effort to supporting their children in mastering this stress. A list follows of guidelines for paediatricians who wish to help their patients by educating their parents.

Parents intending to divorce should discuss the issues with their children before the separation to prepare them for what is about to happen in a manner geared to their ages and developmental levels. With preschool children this discussion should take place a week or two before the family's break up; with 5–8 year olds the discussion should be a month or two beforehand; older children

should be given longer notice. If possible parents should talk to their children together to show that they agree. They should expect that, after this first discussion, they will need to continue talking about the issues with the children as a group or individually depending on the children's reactions and the questions they raise. The initial discussion should cover the following 10 points.

(1) The parents intend to end their marriage, live in separate homes, and no longer be husband and wife, because they have stopped loving each other and cannot live peacefully with each other; the divorce has not been caused by anything the children have done.

(2) The couple intend to continue as parents of their children, to love them and care for them throughout childhood. They promise this without regard to what may happen in the future, when one or other may remarry and have additional children.

(3) The children will live in the home of one parent and visit the other parent regularly. The parents know that children need continuing contact with both of them for healthy growth and development, and both want the children to maintain close links with each parent.

(4) The divorce will be permanent. If the parents stop quarrelling after the separation and become friendly as they once used to be this does not mean that they will live together again.

(5) The parents realise that the children will probably oppose the divorce because it breaks up their home, but the children cannot alter their decision and should not try to do so. It has been made by the adults because of adult problems.

(6) The parents know that the children may feel angry, upset, and insecure. They have taken these reactions into account and are sorry about them. They will help the children master these feelings; most children succeed in this over a few months.

(7) Divorce is common; every second or third marriage ends in this way. Thus the children should not feel different from others; they should not feel

ashamed because their parents have divorced. Like other family matters this is private, but the children should feel free to talk about it to their close friends and their teachers. It often helps to share such matters with others who can provide support in times of difficulty. If, for a few weeks, thoughts about family troubles interfere with the children's capacity to concentrate in the classroom or in homework it would be good for their teachers to know what is happening and help the children overcome the temporary difficulties.

(8) The children should stay out of the quarrels between the parents; they should definitely not take sides. Even though the parents have stopped loving each other they continue to love their children and will always do so. They each want the children to love the other parent. They will do their best not to say bad things about each other to the children; if because of anger they do not always succeed, the children should forgive them.

(9) The parents do not wish the children to carry messages from one to the other, and promise to try not to send messages through the children. They do not wish the children to tell them what the other parent has been doing.

(10) The parents jointly or individually will talk to the children about these matters from time to time before and after the divorce. They know that it will be hard for the children to understand and come to terms with what is happening and that it will take a long time for them to adjust to the division of their family into two separate homes. The children should express their feelings in any way that is comfortable and should feel free to ask questions, which the parents will try to answer.

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