



DEALING WITH THE DILEMMA OF DIVORCE: Dos and Don'ts for Parents

For Catholics, the Sacrament of Marriage, or Holy Matrimony, is a public sign that one gives oneself totally to this other person. It is also a public statement about God: the loving union of husband and wife speaks of family values and also God's values. The couple vow before the Christian assembly that their love will be a sign and sacrament of God's love for us. Marriage then, is a covenant "by which a man and woman establish between themselves a partnership for the whole of life". However, even the Church accepts that there are many reasons why two particular people cannot join their lives in marriage and sometimes it becomes apparent only years after the wedding ceremony that there was no marriage there in the first place. Although different to the legal definition of divorce, to declare publicly that the marriage never existed is what Catholics call an "annulment". According to 2006 figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, about half of the 50, 000 Australian divorces annually involve children. Changes to the Family Law Act since July 2006 recognise a child's right to a meaningful relationship with both parents (except where violence or child abuse are involved) and encourages family dispute resolution with the assistance of nationwide Family Relationship Centres.

THE IMPACT OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE ON ADOLESCENTS

Immediate and middle-term reactions to parental separation may result in adolescents displaying overt depression and appearing to 'opt out' of family life and withdrawing to other relationships outside the home. Friends may become the alternative to the family, providing a sense of belonging, continuity and stability during this time of uncertainty and change. Worries about their own relationships and future marriage may also surface. Reactions experienced by the adolescent are usually very much like that of a bereavement following the loss of a loved one. The longer-term problems associated with divorce are anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, problems in relationships (especially for girls), difficulties on assuming parenthood and an increased likelihood of divorce in the youngster's own marriage.

THE IMPACT OF PARENT BEHAVIOUR AND CONFLICT

Divorce is never easy for either parent. Researchers have found that parents generally express their anger more openly with older children and try to shield the youngest children from the worst of the bitterness. The impact for older children, within the nine to eighteen year old age group is that they are frequently more upset and their distress continues parallel to their parents' anger. Studies also indicate that, in some cases, males and females tended to identify with the humiliation and feelings of rejection that overwhelmed their angry mothers. As a result, they were more distressed and upset by the anger and bitterness the mother expressed toward the father. Older girls reported feeling emotionally abandoned by their mothers at the critical time when their need for support was paramount.

REDUCING THE IMPACT OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

The greatest protective factor for reducing the impact of separation and divorce is the quality of your daughter's relationship with each parent and how these change after separation. Several studies have suggested that, where an ongoing relationship with both parents is not possible, a continued good relationship with at least one parent was associated with better outcomes. Research has also indicated that adolescents who continue to experience their father's continued interest and those who have a



DEALING WITH THE DILEMMA OF DIVORCE: Dos and Don'ts for Parents

capacity to rely upon their peers for entertainment and support were less likely to suffer loneliness. Grandparents living within the home has also been found to be a protective influence.

Regardless of the parent's feelings towards each other, both parents are still responsible for the parenting and teaching of their children. Parenting after divorce involves helping your daughter move through the psychological tasks of: understanding the divorce; strategic withdrawal – adolescents need to return to living their own lives as soon as possible after the divorce, commence their usual activities and continue to return both physically and emotionally to the 'normal' tasks of growing up; deal with loss and anger; work through and resolve guilt and misunderstandings; accept the permanence of the divorce and accept that they are loveable and can still both love and be loved following the divorce.

DO

- Be as open, honest and frank with your daughter as early as you can and keep her informed of all major developments in order to prepare her for what lies ahead: remember that your daughter has witnessed your quarrels, overheard remarks and noticed changes in your moods and behavior.
- Allow your daughter to ask as many questions as she needs to in order to provide her with the opportunity to clarify, accept and understand the circumstances surrounding the divorce
- Understand, tolerate and allow your daughter to go through her own individual stages of grieving
- Express and label your own sorrow if you are feeling it: this gives your daughter permission to cry and mourn without having to hide her feelings of loss from you, others or from herself
- Give your daughter permission to love BOTH parents freely and openly. AVOID loyalty conflicts
- Both parents should reassure your daughter that the divorce does not weaken the bond between the non-custodial parent and herself, despite the fact that you now live apart. Arrange for QUALITY time together, be flexible with arrangements and consult with your daughter regarding her wishes
- Seek help from other supports, including friends, family and trained professionals
- Notify the school of your family's circumstances in order that they can be supportive of your daughter. Support systems are essential for helping her to return to some sense of 'normality'
- Remember that adults, children and young people can and do overcome adversity: you can assist your daughter to adapt to this and other unexpected changes that are an inevitable part of life.

DO NOT

- Conceal the difficulties in your relationship or delay informing your daughter of your imminent separation: a long period of uncertainty characterized by ongoing

Sources and Further Reading:

Burrett J. & Green M. *Shared Parenting: Raising Your Children Co-operatively after Separation*
Herbert, Martin (2003) Parent, Adolescent and Child Training Skills, *Separation and Divorce: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope*
McIntosh, J. (2003) *Because it's for the kids. Building a secure parenting base after separation*

Websites for Parents:

www.helpguide.org/mental/children_divorce: Coping with Separation and Divorce

www.umass.edu/fsap/articles/divorcewks

Children and separation: A guide for parents and others

www.familylawcourts.gov.au/wps/wcm/resources/file/eb1b334ca39c9ac/Child_and_Separation.pdf



DEALING WITH THE DILEMMA OF DIVORCE: Dos and Don'ts for Parents

conflict, followed by an abrupt statement announcing the separation is harmful.
DO assure your daughter it is not her fault

- Openly share your bitterness, blame or accusations against the other parent or put down the other parent in front of your daughter. DO establish a working relationship with your ex as a priority.
- Discourage talk on the subject of the divorce and separation. DO make yourself available to talk
- Alter the role of your daughter by making her a replacement for the departed parent
- Give priority to legal guidance over seeking guidance to cope with painful emotions such as anger, guilt, hurt, anxiety and despair. Both are an important part of providing for your own as well as your daughter's needs. Acceptance, guidance, understanding, stability and unconditional love are crucial

In summary, in the majority of cases, your daughter's ultimate well-being depends on her ability to maintain close emotional contact with *both* parents. Research has explicitly shown that situations where a child or adolescent is torn by the ongoing conflict of loyalty is harmful and detrimental to their long-term development. In cases where parents find it difficult to see eye to eye, a helpful motto, ideally, might be, "If we cannot make a success of our marriage let us at least make a success of our divorce.... for the children's sake". Alternatively, in the words of the infamous *Judge Judy* "Love your children more than you love each other". Ultimately, this means putting your feelings and differences aside and agreeing on what is best for your daughter in order to protect her from psychological harm.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

While the **School Counsellor** is available to assist with brief, individual counselling for your daughter in helping her to adapt, manage emotions and cope with change and at the school level, ultimately some form of family counselling with either one or both parents is required given the systemic nature of separation and divorce. Family counselling can be provided via community agencies such as **Centacare, Relationships Australia** or via referral to a **Psychologist** from your family's **General Practitioner**.

Sources and Further Reading:

Burrett J. & Green M. *Shared Parenting: Raising Your Children Co-operatively after Separation*
Herbert, Martin (2003) Parent, Adolescent and Child Training Skills, *Separation and Divorce: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope*
McIntosh, J. (2003) *Because it's for the kids. Building a secure parenting base after separation*

Websites for Parents:

www.helpguide.org/mental/children_divorce: Coping with Separation and Divorce

www.umass.edu/fsap/articles/divorcewks

Children and separation: A guide for parents and others

www.familylawcourts.gov.au/wps/wcm/resources/file/eb1b334ca39c9ac/Child_and_Separation.pdf