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Divorce, once uncommon in our society, is now becoming more and more frequent, disrupting our children?s state of well-being. Some children of divorced families have long-term behavior problems such as depression, low self-esteem, poor school performance, acting out, and difficulties with intimate relationships. Children with divorced or divorcing parents often have a sense of abandonment, because their parents become too preoccupied with their own psychological, social, and economic distress that they forget about their kids? needs (Lamb and Sternberg, 1997). In 1988, Professor Jeanne Dise-Lewis conducted a survey of 700 middle school students. The students were asked to rate certain events as to the stress they causes. The death of a parent or close family member was the only thing that outranked divorce (Zinsmeister, 1996). A divorce in the family creates a major life change for most children. Loss of contact with friends, schoolmates, neighbors, teachers, and sometimes moving to a new location may bring a lot of psychosocial stress upon the children, and that stress can be very harmful.

Since the divorce boom started in the 1960?s, father-mother divorces have increased at an alarming rate. Today more than 1,000,000 kids experience a divorce in the family every year in the United States alone (U.S.A. Today, p. 8). As a result of the divorce, many children live in single-parent homes. This usually results in a drop in income for the family. Remarriage creates step families. Children often have a hard time adjusting to this new situation. Many of the remarriages end in divorce. As children see these marriages end, they may become more likely to accept divorce as they enter marriage. It seems that the old saying, ?staying together for the sake of the kids? is becoming a fairy tale.

Parental Actions: Custodial and Nonresidential

Children?s behavior, development, and adjustment to divorce is affected closely by the actions of both of their parents. In a typical divorce situation, one parent has custody of the children and the other is considered to be the nonresidential parent. Children whose nonresidential parents continue to support them financially, whose custodial parents are psychologically healthy, and those who can maintain a meaningful relationship with the nonresidential parent tend to be affected less by the divorce (Lamb and Sternberg, 1997). The nonresidential parent who supports the children economically through child support also tends to spend more time with the children. The situation is improved when there is no conflict between the two parents. Divorces do not always have to be bad; in some cases a divorce can offer members of dysfunctional families the chance to escape from family related stress and conflict (Zinsmeister, 1996). When ex-husbands and wives can work through their problems and go on with their lives, divorces can be considered successful.

Personal Experience

In the United States, about 45% of all first marriages are now dissolved, and in the United Kingdom, 41% divorce within 14 years (Lamb and Sternberg, 1997). Divorces are happening all around us. Most of us can relate directly, or have some friends that have been affected by divorces. Two of my closest friends now belong to divorced families. The divorces of my two friends? parents was painful for me as well as them. I spent days upon days helping them cope with the divorce related stressors. Today we still have bad memories of those several months surrounding the divorces, and occasionally one of them will have a break-down.

Custody and Support

In most divorce situations, the mother has custody of the minor children. The children receive support from the nonresident parent. Historically, the amount of support does not cover half the cost of raising a child. In addition, many of the support payers do not pay the full amount of support awarded by the courts (Lamb and Sternberg, 1997). Wage garnishment and stronger support enforcement laws are possible solutions to this problem. Joint custody is allowed in some states. While the idea sounds positive, children of joint-custody agreements often feel that they are constantly leaving one house to go to the other. The child does not feel a stable home exists. When the parents do not have a good post-divorce relationship, often the children will play one parent against another. This can result in unhappy relationships between the child and both parents.

Stages of Divorce

Paul Bohannon (1970), in (Doob, 1997, p. 142), wrote that a divorce is especially difficult because it encompasses six different dimensions simultaneously and because American society does not yet possess effective means of helping people cope with these experiences. These ?six stations of divorce? include:

1.The emotional divorce. The spouses withhold emotion from each other–they grow apart–because their trust in and attraction for each other has ended.

2.The economic divorce. When the household is broken up, and economic settlement is necessary, separating the shared assets into two portions.

3.The legal divorce. In the courts the formal termination of the marriage takes place, along with bestowal of the right to remarry.

4.The coparental divorce. Decisions are made about such issues as the custody of the children, visitation rights, each parent?s financial and childbearing responsibilities, and so forth.

5.The community divorce. Changes occur in the way friends and acquaintances react to the former couple when they learn about the divorce. Like property, friends, too, are often divided, becoming ?her friends? or ?his friends.?

6.The psychic divorce. When marriage partners break up, an uncoupling occurs, and the sense of self alters. Each spouse must fully realize that he or she is no longer part of a couple. Once again the person is single, and for many this is a shock.

These six stations of divorce are the reasons why most parents involved in a divorce forget about their child?s needs, and why a divorce is so hard on a child. There may be situations where a parent or child is in physical danger and a divorce is the best answer. However, it should not be the easy way out for the parents. ?Divorce is now the single largest cause of childhood depression. Marital disruption, quite clearly, can wound children for years? (Zinsmeister, 1996).

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