

CHILDREN, PARENTS AND DIVORCE

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The current divorce rate in South Africa ranges between 42%-50%. The main causes of divorce include financial difficulties, infidelity and breakdown in communication. Divorce often presents with additional challenges such as abusive behaviour, financial manipulation, non-payment of maintenance, dishonouring of promises with regard to contact with children, a controlling ex, using the children as pawns, legal issues, protection orders and the presence of a third party.

Divorce is comparable in a lot of ways to bereavement, because there are so many losses:

- loss of life as I know it
- loss of a marriage
- loss of a dream
- loss of a complete family unit
- loss of identity

Divorce is loss. The more obvious losses included the loss of spending time with your children every day and the loss of status as being a married person. But the losses go further too. Assets get divided, friends choose sides. Loss of hope for the future and loss of control are also experienced. It is a time of tremendous fear.

- How will I manage on my own?
- Will I be alone forever?
- Will this affect my children?
- What will people say about me?
- Will people judge me?
- Will my children prefer the other parent and potentially reject me?

Divorce makes everyone feel different, marginalised, stigmatised, shamed or isolated. Make no mistake divorce is horrid.

The impact on the children is sometimes forgotten by the divorcing parents as they speed away to their 'new' life. For the children a changed family unit could mean a lot of things. It may mean the introduction of new partners, a remarriage and presence of a step parent, or a blended family (step and half-siblings). These changes are not things that can be entered into lightly. Proper preparation and care needs to be exercised by all parties concerned before changes are implemented as children need stability to function.

Children subsequently experience many difficulties:

- Uncertainty
- Changes in routine
- Feeling a sense of unfairness
- Dealing with a blended family
- Feeling different to their peers
- Having one parent bad mouth the other parent
- Having to continually adapt to two different environments
- Feeling like they have to choose between parents (especially in an acrimonious divorce).

Telling children that their parents are getting divorced

Telling children about the decision to divorce is most probably one of the most difficult conversations one will ever have. Of vital importance is to ensure them that they will be cared for and loved, no matter what. It is important to consider their developmental age and stage because a 5-year-old will need a different type of conversation to a 10 or even 15 year old. Underneath I discuss the key developmental concerns, how and what to communicate and red flag reactions.

Infants and toddlers 6 months to 3 years: Contrary to the thought process of "we divorced when she was still a baby, she doesn't remember anything, it didn't affect her" think about the following... Significant scientific evidence that substantiates that our past influences our present. Our pattern of attachment is profoundly affected by the kind of childcare we received from birth-3years because it is a particularly sensitive period for forming the foundation of assumptions which we bring to all relationships with other people throughout life. At this age, the key developmental issue is separation. Infants and toddlers under 3 years have less verbal ability but are highly perceptive. Being that their receptive ability is higher than their verbal ability, we need to use words and actions to demonstrate things to them. The red flag reactions for this age group include:

- Crying, clinginess, weight loss
- Separation anxiety
- Change in sleeping patterns
- Acting out behaviour
- Regression

Preschool children 4-6 years: Pre-schoolers are known for their egocentric behaviour and wild imaginations. These two elements can make the pre-schooler more sensitive and have feelings of guilt surrounding the divorce as well as struggles to differentiate fantasy from reality. Therefore pre-schoolers develop frightening fantasies in terms of dreams and nightmares but also in terms of how their lives are going to turn out. The trick is dealing with pre-schoolers is keeping the communication open and maintaining routines and stability in the home. Red flags here include:

- Frightening fantasies/dreams
- Regression
- Sleep disturbances
- Clinginess and withdrawal
- Changes in eating patterns

Early primary school children 6-8 years: Primary school children have started to develop abstract thinking which allows them the ability to communicate openly and discuss outcomes. Therefore important in this age group is the emphasis on being honest and predictable with regards to behaviour and verbal communication. They display an increased emotional independence, however, they need constant reassurance from their parents. Primary school children tend to have an increased attachment to their fathers which makes a divorce in this age group particularly tricky if the father is deemed the wrongdoer. Where possible both parents need to try to limit the disruption to the father-child relationship. Their increased verbal ability can result in some very interesting conversations. Keep conversations open, honest and practical in nature. Things to remember:

- They find it difficult to understand that divorce is a permanent change.
- Need reassurance of their safety because they struggle with separation.

Later primary school children 9 – 13 years: Older primary school children have a realistic understanding of divorce. Therefore use direct language with them and communicate with the emphasis on gaining their understanding of the situation. They are capable of more sophisticated relationships and are highly talented at masking their true feelings. They cleverly use language to avoid talking about issues. They are also able to become emotionally detached from the divorce situation in an attempt to not appear

vulnerable. However, this must not be confused with them being 'ok' with it. They are merely detaching from a potentially painful experience. They will however give indications elsewhere in their lives that they are struggling. School marks drop, they become involved with the wrong crowd, promiscuous behaviour and artful manipulation may become evident. Heated conversations about benign issues may become prevalent. Things to watch out for:

- Anger that leads to acting out
- Confusion
- Fights at school
- Withdrawal from family

High school adolescents 13-18 years: Some overlap exists between this age group and the previous one as the behavioural outcomes might start coming to the fore. This age group experiences increased independence and often require or insist on more information. This is a slippery slope when the adolescent wants all the details of the divorce. Try not to fall into the blame-game trap or providing information that they do not need to know. We need to remember this age group is still very much a child. They become challenging of time and often play parents off against each other from their own benefit. Despite their independence, they still need consistency and security. Consistency in terms of rules and security is that the rules may still not be broken just because mom and dad are divorcing. This age groups main goal is identity formation and therefore everything is "How is this going to affect my life?". Therefore tell them what is going to change, how it is going to change. Red flags include:

- Academic performance, restlessness/day-dreaming, anxiety (increase in perfectionism or alternatively lack of motivation to try)
- Engaging with the same friends as before or has there been a change?, is the child withdrawn at break time?, incidents of bullying?, excessively aggressive/passive or passive-aggressive?
- and is the child more tired than usual?, what is his/her mood like? And does he/she have all her homework, is it completed, signed etc?

Guidelines to helping Parents in tackling this conversation

1. Timing: Parents should try to be emotionally ready. Bitterness and heart-break may be present but we need to try not make this already difficult situation any worse of the children.
2. Parents to work together: Communicate as a 'we' rather than an 'I'.
3. Making a Plan: Decide together on what



you are going to say and how you are going to proceed. Also, proceed with the plans and get the legal and practical situation sorted out quickly. This limits the damage done to the relationships between everyone.

4. Being honest and realistic: Do not pretend life will be the same. It is important to prepare children for changes. It is important that children have an idea of what is going to happen, even temporarily. Be constant with their routines and avoid any additional major changes at this time.

What happens next? Parents need to learn to work together and what is in the best interests of the child is of the foremost.

In order to minimise the effects on the children, wrap things up quickly in terms of big decisions, house moves, divorce settlements etc so that the relationship fallout between parents and children is contained in the shortest possible time frame and that healing can start as soon as possible.

Many families struggle more with parenting after the divorce

Divorce means a change in the family structure, traditional roles and routine. Parents struggle to manage this re-formation of the family, and navigate the twists and turns that the two parent, two household life presents. Parents may be wrapped up in their own emotions that they fail to see how their behaviour effects their children. The possibility of 'spilling over' in front of their children is always present and parents need to consciously try to avoid this landmine. The parenting part of relationship endures after divorce but it changes to co-parenting. Both father and mother need to realise that continuity, familiarity and predictability are the foundation for secure and healthy emotional development for all children. Be aware of the dynamics of:

- Forced secrecy – that child is 'not allowed' to talk about what is happening at the 'other' home.

- Child feels s/he is the one who is divorced - that when s/he is with dad, s/he 'is not allowed' to love or speak about mom and vice versa.

Remember that children identify strongly with BOTH their parents

- The child see themselves as being comprised of 'bits' of both parents.
- Therefore an attack on one parent could be interpreted and experienced as an attack on the child him or herself. Consequently, the child may be left feeling confused, angry, anxious and insecure.
- Children, more often than not, become collateral damage in the divorce process. Parents need to actively work against this.



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