DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 687 CG 016 111

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TITLE When Parents Divorce. Caring about Kids.
INSTITUTION National Inst. of Mental Health (DHHS), Rockville, Md. Div. of Scientific and Public Information.
REPORT NO DHHS-ADM-81-1120
PUB DATE 81
CONTRACT NIMH-278-78-0059(SP)
NOTE 26p.
AVAILABLE FROM Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childhood Attitudes; Child Welfare; Coping; *Divorce; *Emotional Adjustment; Emotional Response; Family (Sociological Unit); Family Counseling; *Family Problems; Marital Instability; Models; *Parent Child Relationship; *Remarriage; *Stress Variables
IDENTIFIERS *Child Custody

ABSTRACT

This pamphlet, part of a series designed to help parents care for themselves and their children while promoting good mental health, deals with ways in which children are affected by divorce and how they learn to cope with the subsequent separation and changes. Advice for preparing children for the separation and divorce includes suggestions on how and when children should be told. Custody issues are outlined and alternatives described. Children's reactions are discussed in terms of the age of the child, differences between boys and girls, and the strengths that children possess. Suggestions are given for maintaining healthy relationships between parent and child, and handling new relationships that may occur after the separation and divorce. (JAC)

caring about KIDS

WHEN PARENTS DIVORCE

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Caring About Kids is a series of pamphlets produced by the Division of Scientific and Public Information, National Institute of Mental Health, to help parents care for their children and themselves in ways that promote good mental health. Primarily for fathers and mothers, the subject matter of *Caring About Kids* will sometimes be useful for others, such as other relatives, school teachers, and babysitters, who play important roles in the lives of children.

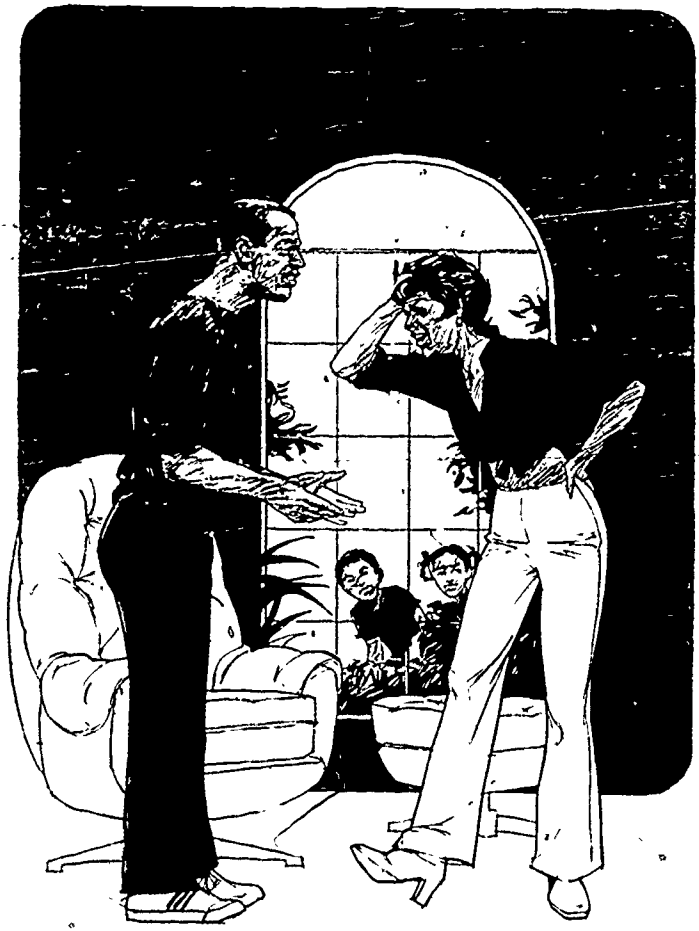
Caring About Kids uses either "she" or "he" throughout an entire pamplet. The choice of gender is alternated from one pamphlet to another, but the information in each pamphlet is applicable to children of *both sexes*.

See the inside of the back cover for a listing of *Caring About Kids* pamphlets and information about how you can order them.

DHHS Publication No. (ADM) 81-1120
Printed 1981

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402

Caring About Kids: When Parents Divorce



Introduction

Divorce: the breakup of a family. Where do you start? How do you begin to rearrange your life, to make the way easier for all concerned? It may help to know you are not alone in asking these questions. More than one-third—actually 40 percent—of all marriages in

the United States now end in divorce. Although legally a separation of two people, divorce is, in reality, a family affair because more than half of all divorces involve children. Divorce ends the role of spouse; it doesn't end that of parenthood.

As divorce statistics rise, we learn more about families who live through the experience. We are discovering that most children of divorced parents eventually adjust, while others become "victims" who are unable to function at an appropriate developmental level or who suffer long-term depression. For some families, leftover antagonisms get in the way of family recovery, while for others divorce becomes a vehicle for growth.

We have found that children and their parents do not necessarily adjust at the same rate, some children do so before their parents. Sometimes the reverse occurs. A child may continue to suffer, even though his parents have come to terms with the divorce and are building new lives. Then, too, individual children within a single family respond differently, one child gaining maturity and independence, another regressing or becoming delinquent.

The divorce process is painful for everyone. Parents rarely reach readiness for divorce at the same time. The "left" parent may feel loss of self-esteem, anger, anxiety, sometimes shock, and often bitterness. Even the parent who wants the divorce may go through a period of emotional stress, feeling lonely, guilty, or disappointed, if the divorce doesn't solve problems or bring expected happiness.

Children, almost without exception, are affected by divorce. How much stress and how long it lasts depend on many factors, including age, sex, prior emotional resiliency, and, perhaps most importantly, availability of adult support. Even in families where parents are in open and serious conflict for years, children usually fear and resent a divorce. An older, more sophisticated child of feuding parents may recognize that a divorce is desirable but, nevertheless, feel worried and resentful.

The most difficult time for all typically occurs during the first year or two that follow separation; by the end of the second year after the divorce, most families are regaining balance and ironing out major difficulties. With time and reduced parental conflict, many children come to see the divorce more positively. If the divorce separates a child from a seriously disturbed or violent parent, it often brings relief and new developmental gains.

Among children who successfully cope with their parents' divorce, the most consistently important factors are the continued love, interest, and caring that *both* parents give. A supportive, mature

custodial parent fosters a child's adjustment and well-being; the maintenance of good relationships with both parents, regardless of the problems they may have with each other, offers added protection for children's mental health and future development.

This pamphlet describes some of the feelings that children and parents experience following separation and divorce and offers ideas parents can use to prepare themselves and their children.

Working Out Issues

Couples seeking a divorce will not always find it easy to reach agreement on issues that affect their children, but they should attempt to do so before telling their children about the impending separation.

Children, even very young children, need to be prepared for the forthcoming separation and divorce. They need information about where they will live, who will take care of them, where they will go to school, and whatever other issues are of major concern to them. Young children fear that they will be left by both parents, that they will not have a roof over their heads, food to eat, or enough money for other needs. They worry that they are not loved or that somehow they were to blame for their parents' separation. Older children worry about moving away from friends or school and about lacking funds for college. Children also worry about where the noncustodial parent will live, how and how often contact will be maintained.

Therefore, regardless of their personal conflicts, and before telling the children, parents ought to discuss and, to the extent possible, resolve the issues of custody, visitation, finances, and continuing family relationships and friendships. If discussions are difficult or heated, the guidance of a trusted friend, counselor, or member of the clergy may be needed to resolve problems.

Custody Issues

When parents struggle over custody or are inconsistent in the arrangements agreed upon, problems are increased. When a child becomes the prize in a parental tug of war, the results can be emotionally damaging, causing the child to feel more insecure, angry, and guilty. The sooner parents face up to and work out custody details, the better the chances are that a child's anxiety about the divorce and his own future will begin to fade.

How do you divide a child's time and love or separate a family without leaving scars? If children remain with one parent, which

one will it be? Considering financial realities, what changes in lifestyle will be necessary? And how can two residences be maintained? Will the children live in both, dividing time between parents?

In considering these questions, parents should carefully balance their own needs with those of the children to avoid creating additional problems. For example, the decision to keep the family home for the child's sake may cause a financial hardship. Or, if the family cannot afford to buy a car, it may be necessary for one parent to relocate closer to public transportation. Whatever living arrangements are chosen, they should accommodate practical as well as emotional needs.

Once the primary plans are made, many other issues need to be settled. How can the responsibility of child care and living expenses be fairly divided? Who will care for the children? Where? How? If both parents share expenses, how and when? Who will pay for medical care, insurance, transportation, food, clothing? How will college costs be handled? How will all responsibilities be shared?

As the terms of the agreement are worked out, no matter how trivial they may seem, it is helpful to write them down. For example, where will the children spend holidays and vacations? Will the parents alternate attendance at school functions? Which parent will provide transportation to extracurricular activities and social events? Will the departed parent's visitation privileges change as the children get older?

Disagreements should be expected and handled as objectively as possible. Each parent has to expect some degree of compromise and look for ways to see the other's point of view. Also, each must keep the best interests of the child in mind.

Difficulties involved in reaching compromises on important issues may be significantly exacerbated when each party retains a lawyer. While possibly the best approach in many divorces, legal procedures typically require an adversarial stance.

One woman describes her experience: "When the lawyers became involved in our case, the battle lines were firmly drawn, and communication between myself and my husband became increasingly difficult. This led to increased conflict and isolation during the first year of our separation and made things more difficult for our children also."

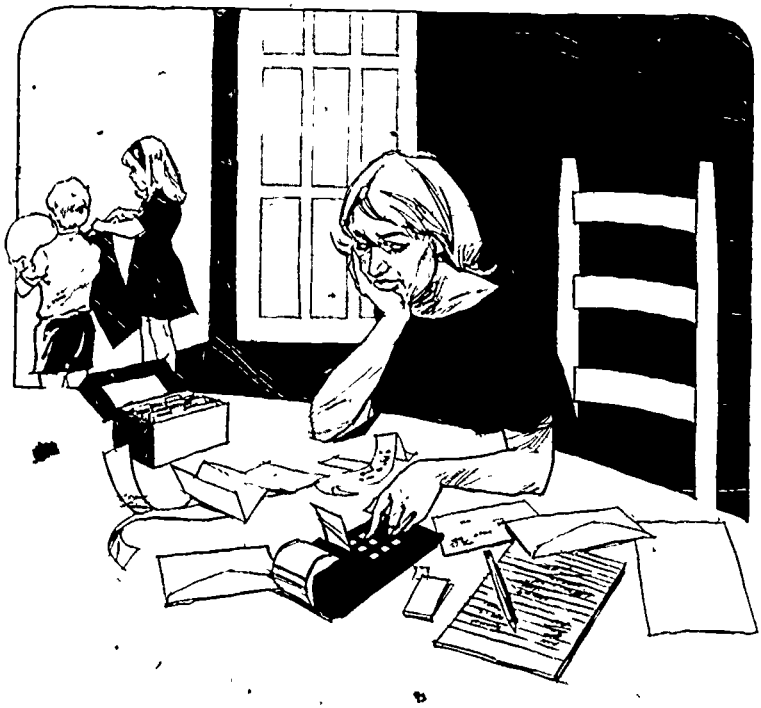
Many lawyers attempt to counsel moderation and compromise, but basic to their professional role is the protection of their clients' interests. A possible alternative in some communities is a counsel-

ing service which helps couples negotiate their own settlement agreements. Included in this service is the help of a lawyer to ensure that legal requirements are met.

Types of Custody

Custody is a responsibility as well as a right. It becomes obvious, when trying to consider the best interests of everyone involved, that there are no perfect answers. Custody does not have to be an all-or-nothing decision, however. There are a number of options available for sharing responsibility. Each family has to explore the advantages and disadvantages of each option to determine what is acceptable and manageable.

Single-Parent Custody. Neither parent relinquishes parenthood, but it is decided that one should be physically in charge. The key consideration in deciding who should assume the custodial role is: Which parent can provide the best care and developmental environment for the child? Although the mother traditionally has been favored for receiving custody, it has been found that children do not



need a mother as much as a nurturing, supportive environment, which either parent could provide. Changes in our society have greatly altered the stereotyped roles of men and women. With more than one-half of mothers currently employed, fathers are assuming an increasingly greater share of child-care responsibilities, and a growing number of men are seeking and gaining custody of their children.

Nevertheless, the vast majority (85-90 percent) of single parents still are women, and scarcity of money is often one of their most serious problems. If she has never worked, the custodial mother probably needs rehabilitative alimony that will enable her to stay at home with the children while they are young and provide reeducation for her as they grow older. However, millions of single-parent women receive little or no alimony or child-support payments. Two-thirds of mothers with custody must work to make ends meet, usually for less pay than men. Custody of young children may require only part-time work, which also limits income.

Fathers who receive custody may encounter problems other than financial, although their standards of living also may be lowered. Studies show that fathers may be less prepared for the day-to-day demands of child care, such as taking care of children when they are sick, shopping and preparing meals, doing the laundry, cleaning, as well as performing the many other chores that keep a household running smoothly.

Whichever parent has custody, he or she should be prepared for increased personal responsibilities and the problems that often accompany them. As with all working parents, the responsibilities of employment and child care can be exhausting. Added to them is the stress of being solely in charge—the only parent available to meet the daily needs of the children, to make decisions about home, care, or finances. It is easy to see that life for the custodial parent can be tough.

One woman expressed her feelings this way: "I felt totally disorganized, like I was going in all directions at once and accomplishing nothing at the same time. Like Humpty Dumpty, I thought I would never get the pieces together again."

As a result of the demands, the custodial parent may resent the departing parent's freedom and new lifestyle; some may even refuse visitation rights as a form of punishment or use other means to alienate the children from the former spouse.

The departing parent, on the other hand, may feel isolated and resentful, having no active voice in the way the children are being brought up. Visiting the former home may be painful for both the

parent and the children, particularly when the visit is over and it is time to leave again. To avoid discomfort, the noncustodial parent may begin to cut back on the number of visits or time spent with the children. But absence is a poor solution and usually causes more pain for everyone in the long run, especially for the children. Visits from the noncustodial parent are strongly associated with children's self-esteem, and the importance to children of maintaining a close relationship with the absent parent should not be underestimated or ignored by either parent.

A 9-year-old boy, who showed symptoms of depression and whose school performance began to decline after his parent's separation, described this situation to his counselor: "Dad and I were always close, but now he hardly comes around. I don't know whether he doesn't love me any more or if he's afraid to visit because he and Mom get into a big fight whenever he does."

If former spouses can be flexible, cooperative, and supportive of each other as parents, children are less likely to play one against the other, disobey rules, and test limits. It is important when children live with one parent that they be given the opportunity to relate to the other in as natural and relaxed a way as possible. Children like to feel they have both a mother and a father they can depend on. When one parent does not interfere with the child's relationship with the other, the child adjusts to the separation more easily.

Joint Custody. Parents legally share responsibility for the children. The details of how such responsibility is shared can be worked out in various ways. In some cases, children may live half-time with each parent, or week days with one and week ends with another, or the school year with one and vacation with the other. While living arrangements for the children may or may not differ much from single-custody divorces, joint custody implies that both parents take equal responsibility for decisionmaking.

The advantage for the child and the parents is that responsibility is shared, and the child retains close ties with both parents. The disadvantages are practical and emotional. If children are moved back and forth from home to home, they may feel confusion or rootlessness. In some cases, joint custody can result in divided loyalties and become an emotional seesaw for parents and child.

For joint custody to work well, parents must separate childrearing issues from the problems they may have with each other. It requires the maturity to work out and manage the mechanics of dividing children's time between two homes, as well as the energy to carry it out. Many parents, however, find the sharing of responsibility and

time worth the effort and a viable alternative to single-parent custody battles.

A father, who is also a lawyer, reports that joint custody has worked well for his family. "My former wife and I each keep the children for a week on an alternating basis. It's a lot of work moving the kids back and forth, and at first the kids had some problems—leaving behind needed school books or keeping their friends apprised at which place they would be. But they adjusted very quickly and now enjoy the access to both of us. As parents, we also find it easier to share the burdens. Of course, we live in the same community, and I believe that, if one of us wanted to move away, we would have to change our custody arrangements."

Split Custody. When there is more than one child in the family, children may be divided between parents. The older children may live with the father and the younger with the mother, or the boys live with the father and girls with the mother. Courts seldom divide families, feeling that children of the same family should grow up together. In

general, it's best not to separate siblings, as older children can help the younger ones understand and adjust to the situation.

Other Arrangements. Single parents sometimes share responsibilities of parenting with other adults or grandparents so that a supervising adult is present at all times. While shared responsibilities can lessen personal burdens, conflicts may arise, unless lines of authority are clear.

Rearrangements

How will custody be changed or rearranged to accommodate the future? Will a parent retain custody after remarriage and, if so, under what conditions? If both parents die or are unable to care for the children, who will become responsible for them? Because it is impossible to know what conditions may arise, it is helpful to keep terms of custody flexible so that they can change with circumstances. In some cases, the terms originally agreed upon may not work in practice. Making allowances for revisions when necessary helps to avoid future disagreements and possible court battles. At times the children themselves determine a need for custody change—children may choose to be with the other parent who lives closer to school or in a more desirable location.

Because negotiating these arrangements can resurrect old hostilities, many lawyers recommend an arbitration clause in the custody agreement which provides for a third party to settle disputes. In this way, couples can stay out of court and avoid a no-win situation where children must choose sides. When built in protections for the continuing care of the child are spelled out from the beginning, changes, expected or not, become easier.

Money as an Issue

Next to custody, financial issues are usually the most vexing. Generally, fathers are the prime source of family income, and some part of their income is needed to support their children, even if the mother works. Yet, most court-ordered payments to custodial mothers are not nearly enough to meet family needs, and many families headed by women live in poverty or on the brink of financial crisis.

Sometimes, money is used as a mask for disputes when the real cause lies elsewhere. For instance, a man may withhold support or make payments late to control his ex-wife or show his children who's in charge financially. Or, a woman who considers herself the injured

party may try to extract higher payments as a method of revenge. If fathers wish to remarry and undertake the support of a new family, they, too, may experience stress and resentment.

Noncustodial parents may try to use money to win their children's affection and treat each visit like a special holiday, showering their children with gifts, sometimes to the dismay of the custodial parent who cannot compete financially. Parents who indulge in financial competition create further problems for their children, encouraging divide-and-conquer manipulation and the stress and guilt that typically accompany such behavior.

"At first," a father related, "I made every visit a special event. I was afraid that if I didn't the kids would be bored. It really got to be a strain—for the kids, too. Then I realized it was me and not Santa Claus they really wanted. So I relaxed, and so did they. We all had a better time with each other."

In the emotional heat accompanying divorce, it is difficult to work out financial arrangements fair to everyone, but careful planning, honest discussions, and flexible attitudes help the divorcing couple work through the difficulties of dividing money and possessions. Some have found a sliding-scale arrangement workable; the husband's payments to the wife may taper off as she gains marketable skills and earns more money, or payments may increase to cover future expenses such as college tuition for the children. Couples have to work out their own arrangement for their particular family needs, with the realization that situations change over time.

Telling the Children

How do you tell a child that his family is going to change? How do you explain what you may not understand yourself? There is no easy way to prepare children for the separation of their parents, but the importance of preparing them cannot be overemphasized. It is equally important that discussion not be delayed until the divorce is at hand. The separation—the physical leaving by one parent— is traumatic for children.

How you prepare your child will depend on your feelings and those of the other parent, the circumstances of the divorce, and the age of the child. Each situation is different; no two divorces are alike because no two families are alike. As a rule, however, children should be informed of the impending separation in an honest, straightforward manner—no lies, no excuses, no false promises. Children know and appreciate your honesty. If you don't know some of the answers,

admit it. Remember that what you keep hidden or don't say will be just as important as what you do say. The more children know about what is happening, the more readily they may adapt to the situation. Often the unknowns scare them more than the knowns.

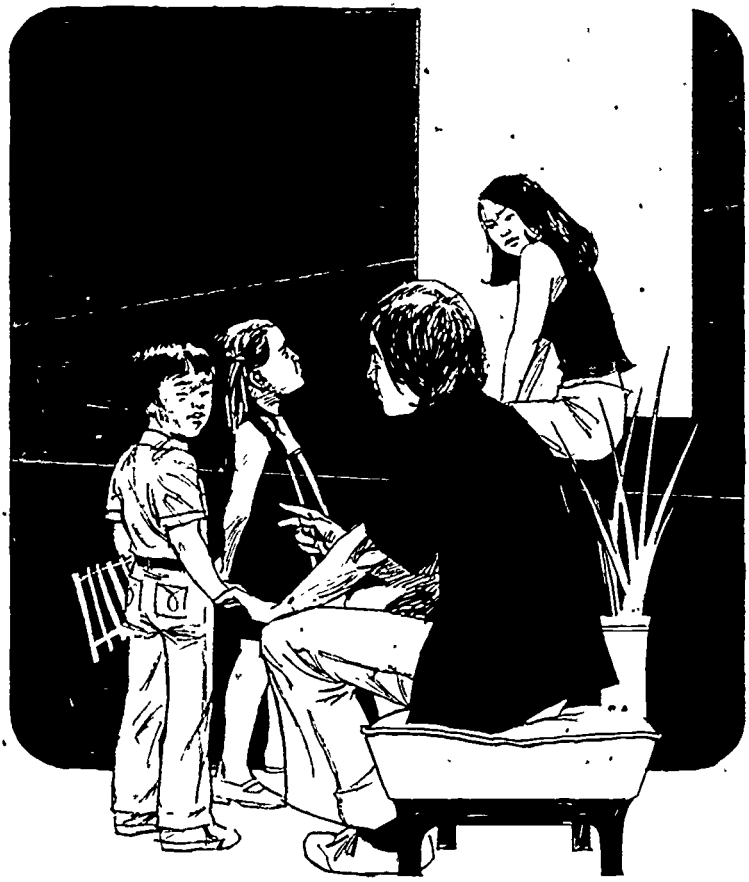
Try to explain the changes that are about to take place, one building block at a time. "Here's how it's going to be," you might start. "Things will be different, but together we'll be able to handle it." Then, fill in the details without overwhelming them with too much information. (For instance, if one parent expects to remarry soon after the divorce, it might be better to postpone this news until the children have adjusted to the separation.)

Prepare yourself for questions. If you can picture the world through your child's eyes, you may be able to anticipate some of the questions: Why the separation? What is divorce? When is it going to happen? Why? Who will take care of me? Where will I live? Will I have to choose between parents? The more a child's questions are out in the open, the more grateful the parents should be. When children are consistently quiet and unquestioning, possibly they are not coping well. Some children may be afraid or embarrassed to voice all the questions they are thinking. But whether they ask or not, questions are probably on their minds. Children need information provided in a way that does not blame anyone. To answer successfully, parents must be able to separate their personal problems from family issues. During the discussion, children should be reassured at every opportunity that they are in no way responsible for the divorce and that both parents still love them.

What do children need to know? An understandable explanation for the impending separation, appropriate to a child's age, is essential. Children need not know all the details—the painful personal reasons—that led to the divorce decision—although children often may be more aware of them than parents realize. For example, if an extramarital relationship is a factor in the divorce and children raise the issue, there should be no denial or blame. Older children can understand that the "other" person may be symptomatic of the unhappiness that contributed to the failing marriage.

Children need to know the decision has not been made suddenly or frivolously, that their parents are rational beings who have tried to work out their marriage but who have decided that a divorce is better than a marriage that is unhappy for one or both parents. But what may seem rational to adults may not seem so to children, particularly those who are very young. One mother described her efforts to convince her two preschoolers that she still loved them deeply even

though she felt compelled to leave home. "I visit them as often as possible and reassure them constantly of my love, but they are too young to understand that the situation at home was causing me to be seriously depressed. I hope someday, when they are older and if I keep a close relationship with them, they will understand and forgive me."



When preparing children for the separation, also tell them whom they will live with, where they will live, where the noncustodial parent will live, how visits have been arranged, and how often. (Taking children to see the noncustodial parent's future living quarters soon after informing them of the separation can make the separation more

real while offering assurance that the parent will have a home and a place where the children will be welcome.)

In addition to knowing that both parents will continue to love and care for them, children need to be made as free as possible from guilt and blame. Too often young children blame themselves for the parents' divorce or get caught up in taking sides, if parents blame each other.

Children also need to know they will be free to love both parents, to express, sadness, anger, and disappointment but not to manipulate parents by playing one against the other or to indulge in uncontrolled anger or destructive behavior. They need to know that discipline will be enforced by both parents, that they will be expected to obey agreed-upon groundrules (bedtimes, chores), and that limitations on behavior essential to the child's sense of well-being and security will be imposed.

Should children have a voice in the decisions? If children are old enough, talking to parents about needs and alternatives may not only help them feel they are part of the decisionmaking process but also open more lines of communication. But even older children should not be put in the position of having to choose between parents. Although most States recognize the right of older children to decide which parent they prefer to live with, few children want that responsibility, particularly right at the time of the divorce or separation.

Who should do the telling? Whenever possible, it is advisable for both parents *together* to tell the children about the divorce. Even if only one parent does the explaining, it is easier for children to accept the situation if the other is present. If parents explain separately, the child is more apt to feel he must choose sides. If the parents' stories differ, the child may be confused and not know whom to believe, what to believe, or how to act toward either parent. In cases where one parent has already left, the other parent will have to handle the telling alone; delay only makes it more difficult.

It may be best to tell all the children at the same time. The presence of siblings may cushion the shock and provide a sense of support and family continuity.

When should the children be told? If you tell them too far ahead of the separation, they may think it's not going to happen or try to prevent it; if you wait until one parent is walking out the door, you have waited too long. Children should have enough time to absorb the idea and ask questions of both parents. The amount of time varies with the age and maturity of the children.

Telling children once is usually not enough. In the days or weeks

between the first discussion and the separation, a dialog should be established in which questions can be reanswered, important information repeated, and the children reassured. The repeated conversations can help both parents and children accept the reality of the separation and establish lines of communication and emotional support so desperately needed during the adjustment period that follows separation.

How Children React

Children's reactions vary according to their age, sex, personal strengths, parental support, and numerous other influences, but almost without exception they initially have difficulty accepting the separation. Young children fantasize about the absent parent's return to the family; older children may actively try to get the parents back together. Children do not readily give up on their parents' marriage. They may harbor their patch-up dreams for years, even when they know the marriage was not a happy one.

In time, most children learn to accept the inevitable. Some even come to believe it to be for the best. Eventually, most recover from the stress associated with the changes and uncertainties brought into their lives by the divorce. Nevertheless, parents armed with the knowledge that children of all ages can be seriously upset for months or years are better prepared to cope and therefore better able to help their children through the adjustment period.

Differences Between Boys and Girls

Divorce researchers have found that young boys generally take longer than young girls to regain emotional balance following separation and divorce. There are some indications that girls may have delayed reactions, tending toward more difficulties during adolescence and early adulthood. Studies show few long-term effects of divorce on children, but young women from broken homes were found to have somewhat more negative attitudes toward marriage than did their peers from intact marriages.

Age-Related Reactions

Preschoolers have difficulty understanding the concept of divorce. Having lost one parent from the home, they often fear losing the other. Bedtimes or temporary separations may bring tears and tantrums, requiring special reassurances to calm them. They may also

suffer feelings of guilt, believing that somehow—possibly because they were naughty—they are to blame for the divorce. Because of the strains on them, they may temporarily lose such developmental gains as toilet training.

School-age children, better able to grasp the meaning of divorce, also have more resources for coping with it than younger children. They live in a wider world, with friends and teachers to turn to. Nevertheless, they, too, experience guilt and fear. One 8-year-old described it this way: "I was sure my parents broke up because of me. I didn't know why I felt that way, but that's the way I felt."

Profound grief and anger are typical reactions to the losses and disruptions brought to children's lives. A child is particularly apt to build long-term alliances with one parent against another, usually to the detriment of all. Developmental and school progress may take a temporary setback as children seek emotional balance.

Adolescents react in many ways. As neither children nor adults, they swing back and forth between two worlds. Involvement in activities outside the home can provide a healing distance from parental problems. A mature perspective can enhance understanding and reduce stress. On the other hand, teenagers are more often called upon by beleaguered parents for assistance. Some may rise to the occasion and enjoy increased self-esteem; others may find themselves overburdened, resentful, and confused.

Some adolescents indulge in attention-seeking behaviors such as running away, stealing, or sexual promiscuity. Sexuality can be a major issue for both adolescents and their parents. The youngsters' concerns about sexual competency and marriage may be heightened by the divorce; the newly dating parent may be seen as a competitor. Parents worry about getting back into the dating game, and their youngster's acceptance of their social life, as well as about having good adult models for their opposite-sex youngsters.

Children's Strengths

While the foregoing litany of problems should prepare parents for some rough times, it should not lead them to believe all is lost. Most children display amazing strengths. Initial acute reactions of fear, grief, and anger generally diminish; most children get back in the proper developmental track; and school problems abate.

Many children become supportive of the custodial parent, recognizing the new responsibilities and problems. Children often prove exquisitely sensitive to parents' needs and moods; some develop closer relationships with both parents following separation.

A vital factor in children's adjustment is their relationship with the custodial parent, typically the mother. After an initial period of shock, most mothers are able to provide needed parental care, discipline, and love. Also important to children's well-being is their relationship with their father, and children who can maintain close contact with their fathers generally have an emotional advantage.

A young woman recounting her experiences when her parents divorced reports, "The greatest gift my mother gave me was my relationship with my father. She never tried to turn me against him, and she encouraged our visits. It made things more comfortable for Dad and me, and I will always love her for it."

In addition to ongoing relationships with the noncustodial parent, anything that provides stability to children—continued contact with grandparents and other family members, the same residence, school, church, and friends—helps in their adjustment.

Reaching Out

The Children

Children of both sexes often turn to neighbors, grandparents, and other adults for comfort and attention, and such supportive relationships can prove important sources of stability to children and offer needed relief to a parent.

Teachers also can be a handy resource for school-age children. While school can provide a welcome escape from the stress at home, offering distractions and contacts with friends, it can also be the scene of behavioral difficulties and failure for the child attempting to cope with pent-up rage and anxiety. Teachers who are informed about the impending separation are often better able to understand the child's problems and extend a helping hand.

The Parent

Even super moms and dads may find the first few years after separation taxing. Custodial parents, in addition to dealing with children's problems, have to cope with money, job, and housing issues. Physical exhaustion is compounded by the drain of emotional strain—fear, depression, loneliness, anxiety, anger, and, for the "left" spouse, loss of self-esteem.

A custodial mother, speaking to a group of recently separated parents said, "At first, I was so totally and continually exhausted, I

thought I would never make it. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other, getting by each day. With the help of family, friends and my children, I eventually got back a sense of control over my life and my feelings of self-worth."

The noncustodial parent may also have problems, especially loneliness, and a sense of alienation, loss, and the stress of trying to maintain a parental role in the face of hurt children or an angry former spouse.

One father describes his experience: "I was a very involved parent and the thought of possibly losing my son was devastating. I felt paralyzed—like if I sat down I would never be able to get up again. But I kept getting up, calling my son, and seeing him. I'm still a very involved parent."

These parents, like most others, eventually faced and overcame their problems, but it is the rare individual who can do so without help. Reaching out to friends, relatives, neighbors, teachers, or clergy gives you someone to talk to or advise you when a decision is needed. Organizations like Parents Without Partners, whose members are experiencing the same feelings and problems you are (and many of whom may be further along in their ability to deal with those problems), can be a strong source of support for the divorced parent. Contact with individuals and organizations provides help, advice, company, and offers options for new activities.

Professional mental health counseling or guidance may also be a good idea. If you or your child continue to harbor anger or suffer

serious depression or anxiety, if your child's school performance declines, or if you feel you aren't coping well either as a parent or in other ways, professional assistance may help alleviate the pain, prevent future problems for your child, and provide needed emotional support.

Divorce is one of the most stressful experiences faced by individuals. It is foolish and self-defeating to decline professional help on the basis that you are not "crazy." You do not have to be crazy to get help. Seeking needed help indicates a rational approach to problem solving. Your local community mental health center will provide assistance at a price you can afford. If you prefer private help, contact your local Mental Health Association, one of the professional associations, or your physician for a referral.

New Relationships

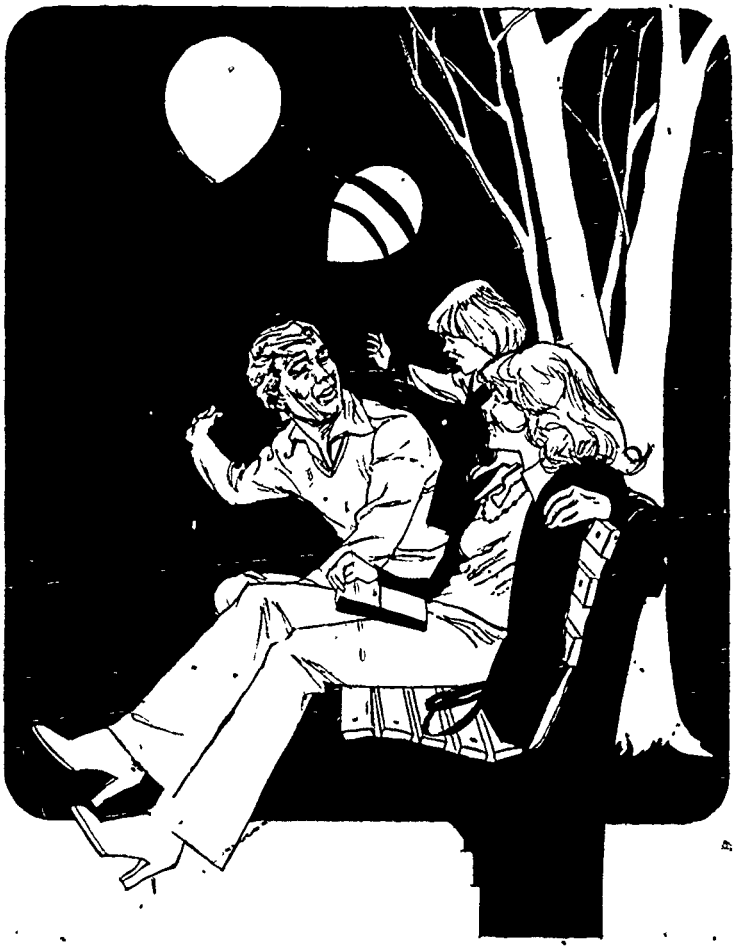
Another major issue for the separated or divorced parent is dating. Whether a parent gets involved in the dating scene depends on many personal and situational factors, but most parents eventually do begin developing new relationships with the opposite sex.

When parents begin to date or engage in a steady relationship with one person, a child may feel both pleased and threatened. Some children are mostly relieved to see a parent happy in a new relationship, while others resent it.

A child's view of parents' new relationships depends on his age. Many young children are afraid of losing the parent to an outsider; others may pin too much hope on every date, looking for parental replacements and leaving themselves open for disappointment when the relationship does not lead to marriage.

However the child reacts, the important issue is keeping open the lines of communication. Children's fears, fantasies, and wishes can be addressed best if they feel free to express them.

The issue of a parent's sexual involvement outside marriage can be a sensitive one. Many single parents, while maintaining quietly active sex lives, prefer that the children not be aware of it. However, some custodial parents who cannot hide these ongoing involvements from the children see them as less of a threat to the parent-child relationship than remarriage would be. In any case; children are usually more able to handle the emotions aroused by thoughts of the parents' sexuality if they think the new relationship is based on some kind of permanence and genuine affection.



Remarriage

The parent who remarries enters a new phase of personal happiness and at the same time a new phase of adjustment typically required of stepfamilies. Children do not easily accept substitute parents. To work out a successful relationship with a stepparent, children may feel they have to forego closeness with their natural, absent parent. If this intimacy was particularly precious, children may feel they are not gaining a new parent but losing the old one.

There may be feelings of rivalry with the new partner of the same sex or an attraction toward the new parent of the opposite sex. And if a child suffers a conflict of emotions about the absent parent—feel-

ing hostility and yet wanting to protect the relationship—he or she may resolve the conflict by transferring hostility to the stepparent. How stepchildren handle the situation depends on how well they have accepted the fact that their parents are no longer a pair—and will never be one again. It also depends on the age of the child and the sex of the stepparent. Generally, stepfathers have an easier time than stepmothers. Also, younger children are generally more willing to accept stepparents, and their relationship depends on how well the stepparent accepts and acts as a parent to them. But the older child is another story. Preteens and adolescents are generally less willing to accept the stepparent, regardless of efforts and attributes.

For all its adjustment difficulties, the stepfamily can evolve into a happy, workable unit. Going from a single-parent family to a two-parent family has its obvious advantages. Children see their parent happier when sharing life with another person, and they can learn to reflect that happiness; the stepparent can fill a highly important supportive role by being available to the child; and responsibilities are more easily shared by a two-parent family.

While there is no easy way to guarantee love in an instant family, children (more than adults realize) may consider themselves somehow related to the stepparent, who is the closest person to the closest relative a child has.

One mother offers advice in building up to a successful stepfamily relationship that begins with the first meeting before the marriage: "Be flexible, and don't worry if the first time doesn't go well. Allow the children to take time to develop the relationship and don't expect immediate acceptance. Find out what the children prefer to call you. Be flexible enough to let the name change as the relationship matures. Face the fact that you may be in for a lot of rejection. Don't reject the children just to get even; it may be the same time they are ready to give you a chance. Once married, don't try to compete with the ex-spouse."

The Beginning After the Ending

Adjusting to divorce is a gradual but inevitable process, and starting a new life takes motivation, patience, determination, strength, and hope for the future. Surveys show that the problems of adjustment ease considerably after the first year. As parents and children adapt to the changes in their lives, they become better able to accept the situation and understand each other. Parents can find new growth as individuals. Children can build new relationships with each

of the parents and experience a new sense of maturity and competence at having coped successfully with an exceedingly stressful time.

Just as it took time to put all the pieces of a marriage together, it takes time to rearrange them so that each person is free to build a new life and gain a new outlook on the future. But within that new life, the role of parent can and should be maintained. Marriage may be temporary, but parenthood is lifelong.

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☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1981 — 354-406

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