

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE: Divorce and Attachment

by Isabelle Fox, Ph.D.

We know as clinicians that divorce profoundly affects and shakes the roots of secure attachments for both wives and husbands and children. In therapy, issues around separation, loss, abandonment, protection and proximity of attachment figures, coupled with concomitant rage, fear, anxiety, and depression are expressed and experienced by most dealing with the break up of a marriage relationship.

What voices do we hear from the family? The stresses of each member profoundly influence the child. First, Lets listen to the mother or wife. She usually expresses feelings of abandonment, concern, self-doubt and anger. When Divorce or separation occur her secure base is threatened:

She worries----

1. *"Can I really live alone and take care of my children?"*
2. *"Will I need to move or go to work or change jobs?"*
3. *"Who will want to date me?"*
4. *"Can I ever trust a man again?"*

She moans---

5. *"I feel rejected and unlovable."*
6. *"I deserve a more secure and intimate relationship."*
7. *"Not only have I lost a husband, but I've lost my role as Mrs. Jones. We are no longer a couple. I no longer wear that married hat."*
8. *"How can I be sexual again? I don't have the body of a teenager anymore."*
9. *"How can I deal with my boyfriend's children when I can't deal with my own right now?"*

Feelings of fear, sadness, and anger are expressed.

10. *"I want this divorce, but I'm scared and really sad that I have failed at marriage."*
11. *"I am disappointed and enraged that my husband is more unreliable now that we're divorced than he was as a husband. I don't know why I thought things would be easier."*

We hear more concerns---

12. *"Am I about to make a mistake the second time around?"*
13. *"Will I be able to handle my own taxes, insurance bills, and investments? I've felt lost in paper work."*
14. *"How will my new spouse parent my children?"*

The need for proximity and protection is expressed-

15. *"I wish we lived closer to my own family now. I feel I really need them."*

A husband may also verbalize other concerns in a therapy session. He may say, "I feel free, but feel that I have lost my home support and my basic security."

1. *"How will I take care of myself, my food, my laundry? Can I survive without my wife's handling my daily needs? "*
2. *"I am angry that I have to work harder. My money is hemorrhaging now that I have two households to support. "*

3. *"What will I do with the children all day and night during visitations? The most I ever spent alone with them is a few hours at a time. "*
4. *"Where will I meet a new mate? It's hard to talk about, but can I be a good lover to strange women. "*
5. *"I never thought I'd feel so sad and empty with my family away from me. "*
6. *"I now realize what my parents went through during their divorce. "*
7. *"How will I handle holidays and celebrations?"*
8. *"Dating right now seems more important than seeing my own children!"*

Issues of proximity are verbalized.

9. *"I was offered a good job in another state-- if I take it now when will I see my kids?"*

As stressful as divorce and separation is for parents, children experience the disillusion of the family as a major upset in their lives. Children of all ages, from infants to young adult, respond to the break up even when there is strife and turmoil in the house. When school-age children are told of the impending break up, it often feels like an enormous shock, an earthquake that rocks their relatively stable and predictable home. In some ways it's like a death, a death of the family.

The children in a sense can almost never truly divorce- they are genetically and emotionally linked to both parents. Rejecting one parent may mean rejecting part of themselves. Their concerns reflect the depth of their attachment bonds. The warring parents create internal conflicts for the child.

"Where and with whom will I live?"

"Don't they know I have enough to worry about at school and at Little League? Now I have to worry about them, too."

"When do I get to see my mom or dad?"

"Did my getting into trouble cause all of this?"

"Why is this happening to my family?" My best friend's mom and dad get along."

"Will they still remember my birthday? Will they both come to the party, or will I have two celebrations?"

"Why don't they care enough about me to stay married?"

"When my mom starts screaming at me, I can see why she bugs my dad."

"My dad always comes home late and never keeps his promises, that's why my mom and I get mad at him."

"Will I still see my grandparents as often?"

"If my mom and dad get mad and stop loving each other, will they leave me when they get mad at me?"

"Am I going to live with my dad and will my sisters live with my mom, or will we all live with one of our parents?"

The effects of separation

Some children may be relieved that the parents are finally going to separate and live apart. They may feel that their lives will be safer and more predictable, especially if alcohol, drugs, physical abuse, or violence has been a part of the scene. Children may anticipate the time when they will be free of tension and stress caused by the disturbed parent.

But, for most children, separation means suddenly dealing with change and experience unexpected losses. Unfortunately, families are under greater financial strain when there are two households. Mothers may need to go to work or work longer hours to help pay the bills. The family home may have to be sold to divide the property as a joint asset.

The child may need to attend a different school and make new friends, adding to the many other adjustments the child has to make. The child must learn to know new caregivers and babysitters. In each home, there will be new rules, expectations, and routines.

Sometimes, the separation is not permanent. Parents may attempt reconciliation and raise everyone's hopes that the family will return to normal. Conversely, the parents may begin to date and spend time with other adults in and away from home.

As when there is a death in the family children are often sucked into a morass of negative emotions of their mother and father or even upset grand parents during separation and divorce. They must deal with the anger, sadness, jealousy, and despair of one or both parents. Parents have little time and energy for laughter, loving words, relaxed and mellow outings, and joyful celebrations at home. Home may be pretty Grim.

Parents may expect a school-age child to fill the emotional void created by divorce, separation, or death. This is a burden for a young child. Often, a boy is expected to be the "man of the house" and a girl to be "mom's little helper," which places too much responsibility on the young child. Of course, age-appropriate expectations are important to sustain. But depriving children of a carefree childhood and expecting more from them than they can provide is somewhat exploitative.

Preschool and School age children who are expected to protect the family often yearn for a new father to take over the protective duties. Young girls may hope for a stepmother to help run the household. Children of divorce and separation are often left home alone for long periods of times. Both parents may be committed to a demanding work schedule to deal with financial needs. They also may be pursuing their adult social lives. Dating and going to meetings, parties, or other social events may intrude on the precious time they could be sharing with their children. Dating may mean new things to worry about:

"When will mom return from the date?"

"Will he be my new stepfather?"

"Am I going to have to have that sitter again, or will I be sent over the Aunt Jean's house?"

"Why does he need to go out, anyway?"

"Why are they always locking the door and making noises?"

"How can my parents get back together again if they keep spending time with these other people?"

"Maybe if I am mean and obnoxious to him, he won't bother with my mom. After all, I broke up my parents' marriage by misbehaving. I can do the same thing again."

"It is hard enough to like my parents all the time, how can I ever like these strangers?"

"These dates try to be so nice to me, but I can see through them. Wait till they really know what I'm like, I bet they won't be so friendly."

"I don't get enough attention from my own parents. And now they bring a new lady in with her own children, and my father acts so nice to them and let her kids get away with murder! Why, if I behaved like that, my Dad would kill me. But he's trying so hard to please her, he lets her kids do anything!"

"My mom and dad don't care about me anymore. They are only interested in this new person in their lives."

"My mom spends all her time on the phone now talking to her friends"

"How will I know who will become my stepparents? There are so many my parents are dating."

"Do you think my mom or dad will care if I like this person?"

Adolescents and divorce

Adolescents are not immune from the stress divorce creates, Divorce adds to the upheavals in the already turbulent years of adolescent. Any major disruption can be upsetting to young people who want to completely bury themselves in their own private concerns and problems. They do not want to be bothered with worrying about the adults or other siblings in their life. They are basically self-centered and self involved as they cope with their own developmental tasks, of finding an identity and dealing with their own sexuality.

As I mentioned before when parents separate or divorce, there are many changes that can occur. There may be enormous financial pressure and intense anxiety and anger resulting from the loss. Teenagers needs can be costly as well. There may be more demands on the young person to be helpful and cooperative, to work, and to provide companionship to fill the void in the home. Most teenagers resent these demands, although they may feel sympathy for the separated parent. They may also feel guilty that they do not want to provide the companionship and help the parent requires. During these years, most high school students feel entitled to be self-centered and carefree and involved with their own friends. Their concerns are personal and intense.

Unfortunately, just when adolescents need to move away from a stable and secure family to be more independent, exploratory, and adventuresome their secure base is crumbling around them. Young people from divorced families are also confronted with parents who may be beginning to date and develop new relationships or remarry.

For many adolescents, fantasizing that their parents are sexual can be truly disturbing. It is much more comfortable for teenagers to think that parents don't "do it" at their age. In my own practice I have seen Young teenage girls thrown into competition with their mothers or their fathers' girlfriends and prematurely engage in sexual intimacies. This may be a result of a strong identification with the women who are playing out seductive roles with their father. Other young people may completely withdraw from boy-girl dating, feeling repulsed by their parents' behavior and being afraid to compete in this arena.

Teenagers can also feel the personal loss of a parent who has moved out of the house. They may not receive any help in dealing with these intense feelings. Often they are afraid to talk about the loss, since they worry that the subject may cause pain to the present parent with whom they are living. The focus may be on the grieving mother or father. As a result, many teenagers may never go through mourning the loss of their intact family.

Remarriage poses other complicated problems for the teenager. Step parenting teenagers is really tricky. The new parent literally steps into a relationship. There is no time to build an attachment or bond. Parents may find it hard to fall in love again but it's harder to fall in love with someone's adolescent. A client claimed that when looking back at her failed marriage she admitted that at least she and her husband both loved their children.

Step-parenting was unexpectedly difficult. Sometimes new siblings enter the home, adding pleasure or pain. In some cases, adolescents feel sexually attracted to their teenage stepsiblings; in other cases, they feel intense jealousy and rivalry. Parents need to be aware of such tensions on the adolescent and acknowledge the difficulties the whole family is experiencing when there is the blending of two families. There should be ample discussion surrounding the events and plenty of preparation for changes that may ensue. Young people can accept realities if they are honestly reported and their feelings are respectfully acknowledged and discussed.

Frequently, adolescents choose to change their living environment and go move in with the other parent or change their visitation and custody arrangements. This may be a relief or evoke more feelings of rejection and loss.

Custody and Visitation

Probably the hardest thing for children to deal with is parents' anger over custody and visitation arrangements. It is so easy to battle over the amount of time and the particular days that the child spends with each parent. It is easier for parents to dwell on these issues than to face their own feelings of rejection, disappointment, fear, and guilt. It is also harder to be attuned or empathetic with their children's concerns.

Joint legal custody and joint physical custody may communicate to children that both parents care about them and want to be involved in their lives. For most children, that is a positive feeling. However, for joint custody to be successful a good working alliance between the divorced or separated parents must be maintained, something that may have been absent during the marriage itself. A divorced parent often expects the former spouse to respond in a sensitive, reliable, and caring way. Often this is not realistic; if both spouses had that capacity, the couple probably wouldn't be getting divorced or separated in the first place.

All children need to be prepared for the visitation arrangement and in time usually adjust to the routine but for most there are stresses and inconveniences. One family tried to leave the children in the family home and each parent moved in and out. The adults could not tolerate the constant shifts and soon gave up.

Children who regularly move from one household to another may be deprived of experiencing outcomes and resolutions to problems or events. To the child, it may feel like reading every other chapter in a novel or missing every other segment in a television series.

Lindsey sometimes left her father's house during a fight between her stepmother and father. When she returned five days later, she expected them to still be angry with each other. She didn't experience the resolution of the disagreement or feel the affection that followed.

If children miss a party or family outing, they feel left out when it is reminisced over and laughed about. They also may not be able to share their own positive or negative experiences with their other parent. They may be afraid to stir up jealous or angry feelings. As a result, they may feel a sense of isolation and alienation from one or both parents much of the time. They may not have peer relationships available in both homes. "There's no one to play with at my father's apartment" one 9 year-old complained. Keeping track of possessions, clothes, books, homework can add to the complication of frequent visitations

Custody and visitations at all ages seems to add to the stress of children of divorce, but if each parent treats the visitation arrangement with respect, keeps to the time schedules, and considers the child's bed time and eating routines stress can be minimized. We can hear the worries and complaints of school-age children and adolescents, but what of those feelings from the non-verbal infant and toddler who are the victims parental and court decisions that often are not in "their best interest".

A typical example: A request by a father who wants weekend visitations for Toby his 10 month old. "I am a good dad – my hurried visits during the week aren't enough." "I want a Friday and a Saturday overnight; I'll bring him back by noon Sunday – I'm entitled to equal time!"

On the surface, it does sound quite logical. But, it overlooks a basic need of every infant: the creation and strengthening of the infant's feeling of trust and security that can only come from consistent nurturing care by their primary caregiver in a familiar setting. Toby, by 10 months, has

developed a close “attachment” and bond to his mother. When he is upset, he turns to his mother for feeding, comfort, and security. Since he had no language ability and little or no sense of time, he cannot be prepared for any change in his environment or routine. To allow “overnights” away from his primary attachment figure (mother) and in an unfamiliar setting would be stressful and traumatic, with long-range and even lifetime negative consequences! It is impossible for the mother (or anyone else) to explain to a 10 month-old child, “I love you. I am not deserting you.

I will see you again in just 24 hours. I can’t nurse or sing to you tonight. Don’t despair.” Instead, the non-verbal infant, away from his familiar home or apartment cries, and protests, We can imagine that he or she feels abandoned with deep feelings of impotence, anger and sadness. The crying may eventually subside, but the residue of rage and hopelessness can haunt the child and influence the relationship with both his mother and father for years to come. “Overnight” visitation away from the primary caregiver and familiar routines is not in the best interest of most children until approximately age 3 when there is usually enough language ability for the child to understand where he is going, who will take care of him, what is happening and when he will be returned to his familiar caregiver. It is true, that some children speak quite well at 2 years and if they do, overnights can be considered somewhat earlier. But, extended time away – especially at night, does create stress for most children. Of course there are Dads or Grandparents that are the primary attachment figures and nights away from them can be stressful as well. Night time visitations is qualitatively different from day time outings

For infants and toddlers, visitation by the non-residential parent should start with frequent visits with both parents present. However, if the infant is separated from his familiar environment, he should be no more than an hour or two away from the primary attachment figure – (which is usually the mother, but could be either the father or grandparent). Typically, dad might play with the child in the mom’s home or take the child for a walk to a local park or to the father’s own residence. Such visitations are to be encouraged since a relationship with both parents is not only **desirable**, but **essential**. But it should take place regularly and frequently. First, one or two hours visitation several days a week may be appropriate. When the infant becomes a toddler, the time may be extended to three or four hours. If the child seems disturbed – continues to cry, etc., consideration should be given to a prompt return to the mother or other primary attachment figure. Eventually, the child begins to trust that both parents are responding to its needs. The child should not be made to feel that one parent is abandoning him nor that the other is punitively keeping him away from the parent who provides comfort and protection. This approach, where fathers, as well as mother become attuned to the child’s needs and wants, is the best investment to insure positive and loving relationships with **both** parents.

It is important to minimize the stress that will naturally be experienced by infants and toddlers when separations occur with visitation and custody arrangements. How parents handle these separations, changes in residential environments and routines, and the introduction of substitute caregivers will profoundly influence the emotional security of their child. Primary attachments are very critical and profoundly important. It is in the first years of life that we all learn to trust, to give and receive love, and to develop a sense of optimism and hope. Such attachments and the bonds that are created can easily be damaged in the infant and toddler years. They cannot be repaired easily. Fifty years of research has shown us that children whose early security is threatened may become anxious, angry or withdrawn, with lifelong problems. The primary reason why overnights can be endured (and – later – enjoyed) is that cognitive skills and verbal ability allow the **older** children to be prepared for separations and to be able to communicate more effectively their needs, desires, worries and concerns.

In many situations, court decisions are made on the basis of what is “fair and equitable” to each parent rather than what is best for the child. But a child is not a bank account or other asset to be divided. The child who is older than three can retrieve memory of difficult experiences and with the help of a sympathetic ear, resolve and mitigate these stressful experiences. However, the pre-verbal child is unable to conceptualize or even recall disturbing events. Instead, these infants

and toddlers are left with a legacy of anger, sadness and anxiety, which is extremely difficult to remedy. All possible efforts should be made to avoid this result and not make decisions, which are stressful and traumatic for the infant and toddler. We know from current research how trauma and stress affect the brain and create negative effects in the years to come.

In conclusion, as therapists, it may important to help parents realize that staying together for the sake of the children may be important, especially if they can model constructive patterns of conflict resolution of differences and disappointments.

The preservation of the family secure base, proving there are no extremes in parental abuse, drugs, or alcohol, set a great example to the children and continues to provide in their primary relationships, attachment figures and environments. Unfortunately, divorce exposes the family to the pains of separation, the stress of anxiety, anger, fear, and the loss of proximity and protection of an important attachment relationship. The various aspects of attachment theory help us understand why the break up of the family can usually be such a profound and difficult experience for mothers, fathers, and especially children.

Isabelle Fox, Ph.D.
3929 Stansbury Ave.
Sherman Oaks, CA 91423
(818) 788-8796
foxbethere@aol.com