Overcoming Divorce Trauma

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Foolproof Strategies for Maintaining Your Child's Equilibrium

As is typical in practically every divorce, your children are usually the last know. Even when a marriage is fraught with discord, children generally hold onto the wish that their parents will somehow manage to stay together, or, like The Parent Trap, they can engineer a modicum of a truce. But in the real world, acrimonious marriages generally end in equally contentious divorces. When that happens, a constellation of emotions surface, feelings of abandonment rage, psychological dysregulation, and immense anger are but a few of the overwhelming feelings children experience. Divorce is never easy. Even in the most civilized of circumstances, almost everybody is put through the wringer, with children suffering the most. But what happens when you are the cause of their pain? Even in the final stages of a divorce, many parents still don't want to own it. They know that they must do something about their child's anguish, but they're just too busy fighting the custody battles, property settlements, and a host of other issues that need to be resolved. Such parents are sometimes accused of putting their needs before that of their children. The kids think their parents are selfish for not listening. Who really loses? Do they feel they can express themselves? Read on for tips on how to create a safe and contained atmosphere for your children to maintain their self-esteem and emotional equilibrium.

The Trauma Trilogy

Trauma, masking as stress and anguish, are usually the first to manifest in a child, causing them to feel despairing, hopeless, and lost. When the child suffers such a devastating personal loss with the divorce of her parents, depression and the erosion of self esteem is usually the first to occur. In many cases, the child blames himself for the demise of his parent's union and is overwhelmed with grief. Trauma experiences in children can produce oppressive feelings of sadness, recurring anger, self-blame, and even violence. A national study conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services in the late 1990's concluded that:

- Children under the age of 18 suffer 40% more anxiety as a result of their parent's divorce, and that rate is doubled if the parent divorces multiple times;
- After a child is diagnosed with depression, there is a fifty percent chance of recurrence if the problem is not ameliorated; and,
- Three quarters of children under 18 polled stated they would rather live with a relative than endure the stress and trauma or another divorce or combative parents.

Human physiological response is not unlike animals. Born with survival instincts, when we feel threatened or endangered, the sympathetic nervous system, otherwise known as the flight or fight response, kicks in and ignites a set of physiological and neurological mechanisms to confront the situation and produce a stress reaction. However, in spite of years of extensive research and clinical studies, the understanding of trauma and its aftermath is still in its nascent stages. Though in 1966, trauma was characterized as "the neglected disease of modern history," it is now is recognized as one of the most enduring psychological problems. Only since 1980 did the American Psychological Association include a classification for post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, and is recognized as a forerunner to clinical depression. Depending on the child's age, clinical depression and trauma may mask itself as aggression or sadness, which many parents mistake as aggression as a result of the divorce. "In this case," says Mary Cotchello, MA, MFT, a marriage and family therapist in private practice in Omaha, Neb., "stressful situations are misdiagnosed, and the child is accused of ‘acting out’ and being aggressive for no known reason. Problematically, there IS a reason, but it goes unacknowledged."

Emotional Casualties

Recognizing the difficulties in managing your child's emotions, and how differently they manifest themselves is a challenge in itself. According to Margaret Mearson, Ph.D., a family therapist who specializes in divorce cases in Palm Springs, Calif., and an extensive lecturer on the subject of human behavior, believes that children will respond to stressful situations in a variety of functional ways. "Keep in mind that 'functional' is what the child uses to cope. In some cases, they may act violent, other times, guarded and silent, and in rare cases, they may actually tell you how
they really feel. The last, of course, is a novelty," laughs Dr. Mearson. "Usually it's the other two." Some signs to look for in children who are experiencing depression are:

- **Loss of spontaneity.** "This is one of the first problems to occur, and one of the most primary. Humans are wired for fun and adventure, and when your child becomes morose, consider it indicative of a serious problem," says Dr. Mearson.

- **Excessive brooding.** While some children are able to bounce back after a divorce, others take longer, but a child who has become gloomy for a long period of time is probably not going to get better without professional assistance. Withdrawal should not linger for months on end.

- **Your child's grades have dropped dramatically.** "The difference in 'dramatically' is anything from forgetting to do homework on a regular basis to seeing grades drop," says Bryon Pierce, MA, LMFT, a marriage and family therapist in Hartford, Conn., and author of the upcoming "Divorce Your Style: Creating A Class Act," due out in November 2005.

- **You suspect your child is using alcohol or drugs.** "Believe it or not, it's never too early for them to start experimenting, and it's never too late for you to discuss the subject with them," says Byron. "If you have any reason to suspect this, do something before it's too late."

- **Your child has lost interest in his favorite activities.** "Did he like to play soccer? Paint? Did your daughter spend every other Saturday with her best friend?" A loss of participation in social affairs creates isolation, a condition commonly seen in depression," says Byron.

- **Your child becomes moody and irascible, snapping at simple questions or not responding to reasonable requests.** "If you ask your child to take out the trash and she flies off the handle, that's an extreme reaction," says Dr. Mearson. "Take a good look at that."

**Save your kids before you divorce**

The point of any sane divorce is to get the children through it with the least amount of psychological harm as possible. One of the most damaging aspects of divorce, according to statistics from researchers and family courts, is open parental conflict. A study of more than 2,000 divorced people in 1999 revealed that more than 50% still argued in front of their kids. "Conflict of this nature creates a breeding ground for open warfare. This is the worst thing you can possibly do," says attorney Rose Cohen, a family law specialist in Woodland Hills, Calif. "Argue anywhere except in front of your kids. This kind of discord is very disconcerting and creates a more hostile environment. Children should never be within listening range when their parents are fighting." Such altercations create serious problems with kids, ranging from lack of trust to aggression. Exposing children to conflict also places them in what psychologists call "Loyalty Conflicts," forcing them to choose sides. According to Catherine Lee, Psy.D., a psychologist in private practice in Los Angeles and author of numerous essays on divorce and the emotional outcome on children, Loyalty Conflicts "damage a child's self-esteem and sense of emotional security. They feel they cannot be safe with one parent or the other. To whom can they turn?" If you are not able to communicate civilly with each other, consider doing it through your attorneys.

- **Establish a working relationship with your ex.** "Even if it's easier said than done. You may not be husband and wife any longer, but you are still parents to your children," says Dr. Lee. "This is truly a matter of the Best Interests of the Child. Make it your business to be a class act all the time, especially for the children," she concludes. "You won't be sorry."

- **Modify your expectations.** Divorce brings out the ugly side of people. Just ask Kate Fellows, a professional mediator in Trenton, N.J. Kate has mediated more than two hundred divorces and says she cannot recall one single episode where both parties did not try to control and exploit each other. "By resorting to manipulation, and worst of all, lies, divorcing couples are forgetting who they're hurting the most," says the exasperated intermediary. "Remember, in the eyes of your child, you're also injuring each other." Do the best you can to distance yourself from this kind of volatile situation.

- **Try to be flexible.** Who gets them on Christmas day, New Years Eve, whatever, "remember that you're doing this for your child, above all," says Dr. Mearson. Where children are concerned, nothing is predictable. Try to understand your child's perspective and remind yourself how difficult it is for them, and how you can teach them to overcome even the toughest times. "This is a great time to teach your kids that they're bigger than their problems," she says.

- **If you suspect abuse, do something about it immediately.** "But never use this a means to gain custody," warns Jake Meyers, a family law attorney in Seattle. "That is practically a sure method of losing completely. Let your attorney know about the suspected abuse and report the culprit to your
local Child Protective Services, and keep careful documentation of all complaints from your child. Look for bruises, take pictures, and do everything you legally can to keep your child from being abused again.”

- **Remember the five psychological components:** Acceptance, Guidance, Understanding, Stability and Unconditional Love. “If you can give them this much,” says Dr. Mearson, “you’re way ahead of the game.”

Get Help

For yourself, that is. There is absolutely no shame in seeking professional psychological assistance. An easy referral source is through your divorce attorney or family doctor.

Kid Reassurances

- **Assure your child the divorce is not their fault.** They’ll need to hear this one repeatedly.
- **Find them a support system.** Get them involved in after school programs, sports, a reading class, anything that will keep them occupied and absorbed in a constructive endeavor.
- **Stop blaming each other.** It doesn’t matter to your kids who did what to each other, only that their parents are splitting up and the entire situation is painful for them. Make it clear that, while you and your ex do not love each other, you still love your child and will always be there for them.
- **Make yourself available to talk, reassure, comfort, and assuage their fears.** Answer their questions honestly without assaulting each other. Remember, you had children with your ex, so find it in your heart to at least respect that aspect of them.

Kid friendly divorce movies

**Man of the House**
A Chevy Chase film depicting a step-father who is reluctantly welcomed by his step-son and promotes two important themes: divorced single parents can actually develop an intense relationship with their step-children. A positive impact film, especially for boys.

**Paradise**
The son of a single mother is left in a small town with a man and his wife when his mother is pregnant. The child then tries to for his own nuclear family with them, reflecting the tendency to seek some kind of solace in a two parent family.

Recommended reading

**The Fresh Start Recovery Workbook: A Step-By-Step Program for Those Who Are Divorced or Separated.**
By Bob Burns and Tom Whiteman
This book is one of the most definitive on the subject, and highly recommended. Readers will discover most of their feelings are nor uncommon, and will learn how to productively deal with the most painful aspects. Very user friendly.

**Aftermarriage: The Myth of Divorce**
By Anita Wyzanski Robboy
This book explores the five types of marital bargains that become evident in the unraveling of a marriage. This book is not only a roadmap to the divorce process but an insightful exploration into marriage as defined by restrictive laws.

**The Visitation Handbook**
By Brette McWhorter Sember, Attorney at Law
A practical guide to navigating your way through the cumbersome visitation process. Extremely useful and well written.