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Introduction for Parents of Children in Divorce

The purpose of this paper is to provide suggestions for divorced, parents working on a plan for sharing time with their children. It is assumed that both co-parents desire the best for their children, but making this happen is not the easiest thing to do, especially, if one or both of the parents feel unfairly treated by the divorce and disagree with the custody arrangement.

Divorce is not a pleasant process for parents and their children. The focus of these suggestions is to educate, not to assign blame to one parent or the other. However, make no mistake about it; everyone involved is affected with negative emotions: the children, parents, grandparents and other collaterals in one way or another will feel as if they were given the short-end of the stick. The focus of this paper is in the “best interest” of the children regardless how the involved adults may feel about the final decisions.

Of all of the disagreements parents have; custody and co-parenting time often result in the most difficult and greatest conflict between the parents.

Early Neutral Evaluation (ENE):

ENE is an alternative process replacing the commonly used custody evaluation studies that were lengthy, costly, and contentious for all of the parents and children. The custody studies are based on litigious methods rather than appealing to cooperation. The intent of the ENE is to assist parents toward agreements in a much shorter time with less costs, etc. More often than not, rigid entrenchment by, one or both parents, begin to put up road blocks as an impasse that leaves the children as the battlefield, without intending to do so. The children feel the “tugs” from both sides experienced as stress and turmoil. The very nature of separation is uncomfortable, but the ENE is designed to reduce this discomfort for everyone.

Decision Making:

Parents may avoid much of the intense-conflict by becoming more informed to make choices from research rather than on emotionally-weighted decisions based on their personal interest. The research results can provide parents with more knowledge to make better decisions for their children, than just their opinions alone.

Suggestions from recent research:

The following information based on recent research may or may not fit your situation; however, these summary remarks are useful for many children of divorce.

The steep rise in divorce rates found in the last few decades is foremost among the changes felt by children and their parents in divorce. The number of children more than doubled from 1960 through the 1980's. Demographers predict after the 1980's, four out of ten children will experience divorce of their parents. This translates into more than a million children each year, influenced by the results and aftermath of divorce. These are the times we live in!

As a result, these children of divorce and loss are greatly over-represented compared to others their age. Once again, I stress no blame, but the trends are based on empirical evidence. Other trends found in the research will be highlighted later in this paper. But first, it might useful to discuss the divorce process or phases.

The Three Phases of Divorce:

Divorce can be broadly conceptualized as three successive phases. The environment of the first, acute phase is associated with highly emotional responses. Divorce, a significant cause of this decision in families with children, is rarely a mutual decision. Separation often occurs when escalating spousal conflict frequently includes: yelling, using disrespectful language, silence, ever present tension and a lack of inconsiderate behaviors. During this first phase, one or both parents may experience depressive symptoms. Poor sleep, body aches, a loss of interest in life with a lack of energy, poor concentration, poor memory, fits of anger, and emotional instability may be involved. These symptoms, along with other disruptions in functioning, may find the person regressing into poor thinking patterns that probably would not occur under normal circumstances. This regression is generally not in the person's awareness and they do not see their thoughts, feelings, and behavioral responses as distorted or out of line which only makes things worse. Consequently, both of the parents, view their attitudes and behaviors as "normal", and acceptable, often when it is not. Furthermore, their defensive thinking becomes consistent with their fundamental personality and beliefs about themselves. In other words, this process blocks insight and they see nothing wrong with themselves to fix. Yet, others may see the person(s) in divorce as having irrational thoughts. Other times, the role of gender differences play a significant role-----women and men just think about events differently much of the time, especially, when it is emotional.

The conditions of divorce leave both parents defensive and blind about their own behaviors. At the same time, their own distorted perceptions, thoughts and emotions only find fault in the other parent. Yet, each of the parents is convinced they are the victim and have gotten a raw deal. While gender plays a large part in this "battle", it is made worse by their personalities, beliefs, and support from others. All of this leads to question, "What is this doing to the children?"

This first phase may go on a few months or a few years, re-enacting the separation drama, repeated with untold damage to the children. This length of time will negatively influence how

long it will take the children to adjust. The repeated cycle found in the first phase, is in the hope of modifying the outcome, but never attaining the relief they desire. Unless the parents begin to act on behalf of the children, closure will be delayed or not even happen which is not good for any one.

The first phase is followed by phase two. This phase is characteristic of the parents beginning to disengage from each other and move into a new set of spaces including: new relationships, perhaps a new job, moving to a different neighborhood, school, etc. This transitional stage will continue with up and down experiences but less dramatic. Stability will peak itself through their awareness from time to time, but the relative calm is still interspersed with “stormy weather”. Overall, things seem to be getting better.

Eventually, the third stage continues in a seamless fashion from stage two not always distinguishing the passing of stage two to stage three. While the third stage is beginning to feel better, there still will be negative experiences and new challenges. But our egos will have developed better mental health now to persist and endure. Strains and challenges will be mixed with longer periods of gratifications more frequently.

Other literature reviewed suggests complex, psychological issues continues for the adults, especially, women with less income for themselves and the children. The number of years invested in their marriage, the age of the adults at the time of divorce and the discrepant opportunities between men and women all affect social acceptability and making money. This trend favors men and still has not adequately been addressed by society

The Effects of Divorce on the Parent-Child relationship is reduced

Divorce is devastating to family’s lives, especially the children. This is due to the lesser amount of emotionally availability the co-parents now have for the children. This is particularly true in high-conflict relationships. Custodial mothers and fathers report that there is more deterioration in the family’s organization, less consistent discipline, rising angers, and lowered expectations in social behaviors. Academic performance and involvement in school, church, and social activities usually drop, at least for a time. Less desirable friends may become more noticeable from moving across town. Family structure and organization once fostered a safe place for children to develop and grow. Children depended on parents in providing this place is no longer available. It is as if someone or something knocked out some of the family walls and you are left standing alone feeling insecure.....with little chance of real protection.

Another factor often overlooked is the role reversal where the parent now relies on the child for support instead of the other way around. The dependence on the child by one or both of co-parents is frequently **found at the core of the parental conflict** and litigation over custody and parenting-shared time. The humiliation of psychological injury inflicted by divorce on parents and the painful, persistence of emotional attachment, on the absent parent may result in “severe ego regression”. Regardless of the previous functioning, divorce brings a new status with a sense of aloneness to adjust in daily living. If a parent was somewhat of a loner before the divorce, the loss of marriage brings much bereavement and perhaps need of help. Many parents

do not seek out outside help, but turn to their children for help in warding off symptoms of depression and mood instability. This dependence of the parent on the child maybe of shorter or longer duration, but is generally not permanent. Nonetheless, this dependence may interfere with the mental health of the children. In fact, some children may enjoy the limelight, from this newly found status because of the sudden, elevated importance, usually not previously experienced. On the other hand, this burden of becoming a peer to the parent may overwhelm an already overburdened child with greater responsibility than the child can handle. This may prolong the reliance and place the child at risk, if it continues. For these overburdened children, emotional resilience to meet the “emotional needs” of the parent and continue a normal development is asking too much. The child may be in denial about playing this role but their development is generally compromised. As a consequence, this extra emotional weight may be buried only to show the effects later on or in other ways. While parents may not intend to place a child in this role, the effects are just as real, especially, if the child has biological vulnerabilities to emotional instability. The children may withdraw, show anger, uncooperativeness, or show little evidence of the extra burden. Sooner or later, the affects will be in evidence.

Competitiveness for the Children’s Alliance:

More likely than not, using the children as the battlefield, started before the divorce, when the marriage was failing. Social distance, anger, and fear bring out the competitiveness for the children’s attention from the parent(s).

Sometimes, disagreement is fought who pays child-care costs. There is accusation that the money paid will not go for the care of the child, but entertainment for the custodial parent. Parents are competitive for other reasons as well. It is quite common that distraught parents place their children in several roles during the failing marriage. Some of these roles ranged from being a supportive listener, to forming an alliance with one of the parents against the other. In being placed in these roles, the reactions of some children are surprise, fearful, in denial, in discomfort, or being loyal to one parent over the other. Sometimes, extended family members, discuss their opinions with the children, only to make things worse. The child’s conscious behavior may be powered by the idealistic impulse to defend or rescue the parent who has been identified by the child (sometimes wrongly), as the victim. And, if the child is encouraged to do this, it may be similar to what is known as Parent Alienation Syndrome. Such alignments generally happen at the age range from 9-14 years (the age can happen at many ages) and the parent who has strongly resisted the divorce. This parent is entrenched with moral outrage at having been betrayed and exploited during the marriage by their point of view. It is worth noting the length of time for the child to adjust to divorce depends upon the cooperation of the co-parents working close together. This cooperative effort greatly assists the child in adjustment

Age, Developmental Factors are Critical:

Developmental factors are critical in the responses of children and adolescents at the time of a marriage ending. A major finding in divorce research has identified common patterns in age related groups. These ages are: 3-5, 6-8, 8-12, and 13-18 years old. Children from 12-18 months

can have some over nights and more than a day away from the primary parent, depending upon the level of cooperation between the parents and consistency of the routine of schedules kept between the parents. This generalization highly depends on many other factors not mentioned, but most parents who are willing and ready can work this out.

Preschool age children are likely to regress following, one parent's departure from home. They tend to regress from the maturation level achieved. For example, if a child is eight years old at the time of separation, the child may then regress to a level closer to five years old. Such regression suggests a careful effort to support the child's needs. All the more reason, a parent should not rely on the child for support. Intensified fears are often brought on by disruption from the separation, especially interfering with routine, during the day schedule and at bedtime. Sleep is often disrupted with repeating, negative thoughts preventing the conditions associated with the ease of falling asleep. The child's preoccupying; fantasy is fear of abandonment by both of the parents. Yearning for an absent parent can get intense. Preschool children are likely to become irritable and demanding and to behaving aggressively with parents, younger siblings, and even peers.

Children between 5-8 years grieve openly for the departed parent. They may share the terrifying fantasy of being replaced: Will my Dad get a new doggie, a new mommy, or a new little boy? Little girls weave elaborate Madame Butterfly fantasies, asserting that the departed father will return to them, that he loves me "the best". Many young people cannot believe that the divorce is final and there is a precipitous (steep fall) in school work. Many of these youngsters wander if they have done something wrong to split up the marriage. It is common for the children to want their parents to reunite. The loss of a parent is significant and has adverse effects on the children in many varied ways.

For those children who 8-12 years, often show a lot of anger aimed at both parents. This group really grieves over the loss of their intact world and suffers anxiety, loneliness, and a humiliation of being so powerless. It can even bring on shame as if the family is "bad". They most likely see one parent as good and the other as bad and are bothered as how their parents can take arguments so easily. Once again, the children tend to have an assuming nature to take care of a needy parent, school performance and peer relations may suffer as a result.

Adolescents from 12-20 years are vulnerable to parent's divorce by showing acute depression, accompanied by suicidal ideation and acting out. These symptoms are frequent enough not to be overlooked. Anger is often intense. This age group is occupied with issues of morality and will judge their parents severely and may identify with one parent doing battle against the other. They are anxious about their future adulthood issues and worried about a future marriage ending up like their parents. They may lose interest in academics, social activities, and change their friends. In today's world, drug use is not out of the question, it reduces the pain.

Promoting Healthy Communication between Co-parents:

Accept responsibility for your own share of what went wrong. Do not assign blame, within earshot of the children. Be extra careful on the phone, children are out of sight but listen

carefully. Do not rigidly resist your former spouse's viewpoint, or insist that your perception of events is only version of the truth.

Stick to the problem at hand and deal with only one issue at a time. Do not bring up past problems, expand the current conflict, or shift over into other problems in a seamless fashion. Blending issues complicates conversation when it is tense.

Keep the conflict contained between the two of you. Do not drag in references to friends or relatives who agree with you. For example, refrain from saying things like, "Even your mother is..."

As a gift to your children, have the dignity to treat your ex-spouse with respect to your children and others. Ask others to join you in setting this positive tone; it removes a lot of stress on the children. Do not insult, use obscene language, or resort to name-calling, even if the parent does. Offending the other co-parent will escalate the problems giving the ex-spouse all the more reason to dig in their heels. More importantly, it will diminish your stature in your children's eyes. Therefore, it is very important to realize that you can dislike your former spouse but provide them the decency of respect in tonality and the language as an example to your children. Once again, this is a good example and will teach them problem-solving.

Stay physically and emotionally engaged with the discussion at hand until it is finished. Do not withdraw or walk out of the room to avoid conflict without warning your co-parent first. Walking out abruptly means an increase in the tension. If you choose to exit, first give the other person a sign that you are doing so. For example, a rising of your hand, as in stop, might allow you to say, "If you do not stop talking about this immediately, I am leaving. Or, you might say, "I do not like the demeaning tone in your voice you are using. Please stop it or I will leave now".

Agree upon mutually satisfactory times and places to talk. For example, explosive couples or couples who are on the edge can meet in a public place, library, church, or restaurant, where outbursts are less likely to happen. Do not negotiate under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Focus only on the problems that need to be resolved. Do not physically intimidate or play on the other persons insecurities.

Listen attentively to the other person's message. Do not formulate any answers for rebuttal while pretending to be listening.

Communicate in more positive tones. If the ex-spouse is late in picking up the children, gently draw it their attention, such as, "Looks like your running late today". This is more effective than saying, "you are always late to pick her up, and you are too selfish to think about anybody but yourself". Or, "you could have called to say you are running late, you moron". Do not use generalizations such as "you always" or "you never". Do not yell in front of the children. This will make the children uncomfortable and even fearful each time an exchange between co-parents is made.

Establish a hand signal to terminate conversations that begin to deteriorate into unproductive, escalating conflict. Do not continue arguing when the other parent gives a signal to stop the conversation for at least a few minutes or pick it another time.

All communication must occur between the adults. Do not send notes in back packs for the other parent with the children. The notes may not reach you. Kids lose things.

As much as possible, each parent obtains a separate set of clothes within each household. Co-parents often become upset if dirty clothes are sent home or are lost. This would be useful with other things as well, such as, materials, toys, and books.

If the child is taking any kind of medication, make sure both parents administer the medication as prescribed. If one parent does not see the need for a medication, contact the child's doctor for a rationale or get another opinion. Medications work best if they are administered as prescribed, not hit and miss. After all, an adult would not take a blood pressure sporadically.

Do not discuss with your children that the other parent has an affair with someone else or even has had repeatedly had affairs. To use a battering ram will only make the child feel worse. Even, if the other parent has done betraying behaviors, use respectful language even though what the other parent has said or done very hurtful things and made you sad or angry. This not easy and calls for repeated practice, a lot of practice. But over the long haul, your children will see and copy this positive behavior.

Children identify with their parents and in a psychological sense sees themselves as the "same" as their parents. Therefore if all the children hear is negative, from one parent about or to the other parent, then the child may pick the feeling that the parent throwing the barbs and disrespectful remarks is also throwing them at the child. This happens much more than co-parents are aware and is extremely damaging to the children. Children generally want both parents to be positive and supportive of one another.

The above material is intended for the convenience of co-parents and for the psychological health of their children. These suggestions may not always fit exactly your unique circumstance with your children, but much of the suggestions should be useful.

If you desire an appointment do not hesitate to contact me, by phone or e-mail as listed at the top of this paper.

Thank you for attention.

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