

Divorce Doesn't Have to Equal Despair

by Terry Top, Marriage & Family Therapist, Executive Director

God's original design for marriage is that it should be life-long; "until death do us part." But, because we live in a sin-filled and broken world, sometimes those relationships end in divorce. Wherever and whenever possible, our therapists strive to restore and heal broken relationships. But when that is not possible or the relationship is too damaged that it cannot be healed, the focus turns to minimizing the harm to the couple and their children.

What is best for the children needs to be at the forefront of every divorcing couple. Children benefit from maintaining the familial relationships in their lives that were important and meaningful prior to the divorce. They also need their parents' relationship to be supportive and cooperative. So many couples get caught up in their own anger and hostility towards their ex-spouse. Children often get stuck in the middle of this conflict causing even more stress from the divorce. It is especially harmful if children sense that they need to "choose sides." Parents need to keep in mind that they need to love their children more than they hate their former spouse. Cooperation with an ex-spouse may be challenging, but it needs to happen for the sake of the children.

Because unresolved resentment can be the biggest problem, here are some good rules to adopt:

- Keep parental disagreements between the two of you.
- Keep disagreements nonviolent both verbally and physically.
- Manage disagreements by setting limits on them including time and place.
- Spell out what is essential to discuss and what is not.
- Separate spousal issues from parenting issues.

Whether parents are divorced or not, studies have shown that kids thrive in a healthy, safe environment. So re-framing your assumptions about divorce, can benefit everyone:

- Divorce does not end your family, it only redefines it.
- Divorce does not ruin your children. Children in binuclear families can be as healthy as children in nuclear families.
- Divorce does not mean total failure. Good things can develop from a divorce that is managed appropriately.

Next, you need to establish goals during the divorce transition. The first is to keep your family a family. Recognize that compromise is absolutely necessary, avoiding an all-out war. Stay in charge of the divorce and construct a vision for your new binuclear family. You also need to make new rules for how the two households will be linked. Often members of the family are at different stages of acceptance regarding the divorce. Adjusting to the changes takes time, especially for children. Children adjust best when they have regular and positive contact with both parents and is encouraged by both.

Finally, integrate divorce into your life in a healthy way. Take time to "sort out" the separation, heal the hurts and resolve your personal issues. If a divorcee bypasses this process, and jumps into another relationship too soon, it's only a matter of time before the same painful issues will resurface in the new relationship. Remembering the good as well as the bad parts of the past relationship is important.

Seeking the help of a professional counselor or the camaraderie of a support group can also be invaluable. Many churches offer programs such as Divorce-Care. Find more information at www.divorcecare.org.



For more information, call
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