

## **Bitter Truths are Painful but Help Children Recover**

The transition process for a child in a divorce is a difficult one which can result in acceptance, growth and renewal or long term resentments and unrealistic expectations.

It is this writer's belief that the most heinous, destructive event that can occur in a divorce process is the use of the children by either spouse to support their own emotional needs or to seek advantage in the process through their children.

If the divorce is accepted and inevitable, every child deserves to know bluntly and directly where they stand. The exact approach a parent should take with their children will depend on the particular nuclear family, the life belief systems of the family and the relative maturity of each child. At some point, even with young children, every child has a right to know that mom and dad are getting a divorce, will never live together again, do not want to be married, and, if indicated, do not love each other anymore. This brutal truth inevitably will result in acting out, crying, assessment of blame, and sometimes pleading for a different result. Frequently, there is a temporary drop in grade levels, achievement scores and, in the teenage years, disrespect, substance experimentation and/or abuse and authority issues with teachers, coaches or other mentors which have not occurred prior to the separation. I believe that with honest direct knowledge, regardless of the pain, acting out and emotional injury, the children are at least standing on reality, firmly on the ground, and have a reference with other children, peer groups, and friends who on many occasions have been through the same thing. They can express their feelings directly to their friends and peers. They can converse with authority figures or others directly about the truth of the situation and can commence their new lives based on truths and not fantasy.

Alternatively, the most destructive approach a female or male may take with their children is to offer denial or false explanations such as "my mom and daddy are not going to live together for a while, but they may get back together some day," or "mom and dad love each other, things are not working out right now and we will just have to see." In the short term, this approach probably is less emotionally upsetting and easier for the parents and the children. In the long run, it can be catastrophic as the children of the relationship are standing in quicksand and falsehoods which give their children no base of reference among their peers at school, church, clubs, etc. They have nothing they can discuss or share with their peers because their parents are "not married" and are "not divorced." They may become confounded, and this writer believes the result may be long-term character issues and other disorders which may be avoided if the children are allowed to go through their own grief reaction and start new lives based on truth rather than fanciful false hopes.

It is absolutely critical that each spouse never demean the self-esteem of the other spouse to their children or to other adults in front of their children. If dad is a drunk and a mother tells her eight year old son this is the "reason" for the divorce, then every time that eight year old boy looks in the mirror he sees a drunk. If a father tells a daughter that a divorce had to occur because of the mother's new relationship with another man, then every time that young girl looks in the mirror she sees a whore. Children will internalize these assertions because regardless of whether the assertions are right or wrong, they are being made by people who are their parents, advisors and whose behavior they model. Rest assured that a frequent dead-beat father or mother is infinitely better than no father or mother at all. Additionally, it has been this attorney's experience that using the children to forge a position in a divorce inevitably backfires before the judge and/or jury and, over the long-haul as the children mature into adulthood, they will resent the self-degradation of the other spouse and hold it against the spouse who tried to manipulate the child for the rest of their lives.

Once a direct, unambiguous, concise, and sometimes brutally honest statement is made to the children as to what their future will be, the best emotional results for the children appear to come from parents who

thereafter remain silent on the topic. Children frequently are dealing with adolescence, puberty, early religious beliefs, adaptation to sexual urges that are normal and hormonal, and every other issue all children deal with as they mature and grow. The last thing on earth minor children need in this contentious environment is to become a go-between message carrier or spy against a parent who is someone they love and who they follow as a role model, during a terrible period of time in their life when their own grief reaction is just as hard and painful as that of the parents going through the divorce.