

CHAPTER 19

Divorce and Children

Today in many countries of the world, 50 percent or more of marriages end in divorce. Even traditional societies are experiencing increases in the divorce rate. The result is that each year millions of children experience the trauma of seeing their parents separating.

Here are the feelings of some young people who have gone through that experience.



I really thought I wasn't going to see him again, because the only thing I knew about divorce was that if your parents divorce, you stay with your mom and you never see your dad again. I remember actually asking my dad, "Which city will you go to?" I really did.

For many children, the worst fear is that they will never see the absent parent again.

One of the strongest feelings about the breakup and the parent's departure is anger.

I've got no feelings for my dad. I see him now and then when he's in town. He doesn't buy any birthday presents or New Year presents. But it doesn't bother me anymore. I've gotten used to it.



One of the few positive aspects about divorce is that some children believed that their relationship with their fathers has actually improved after the breakup.

When he was at home, which wasn't very often, he never took me out and he was very strict and always criticizing me and telling me to do things. But now that they've split up, I get on a lot better with him and he takes me out quite often and we have more fun. I like him better now.

For many children, divorce produces many changes in their lives: moving, changing school, new domestic routines.

I think if you haven't got a dad, you've got to help your mom with the housework. We've got our own routine. My sister does my mom's and her ironing, and I do my brother's and my own ironing. Mum used to do all

the repairs in the apartment. But our uncle taught my brother how to do some things, so he tries to do most of the repairs now. We've been brought up mainly without our dad, and we get on just as well without him. We've grown up pretty fast. You have to be independent.

Nearly all children say they do not want or do not know how to tell their friends that their parents have split up.

I can remember hiding it from my friends. I used to get embarrassed talking about it, and I didn't want them to know. I used to think that if I talk to people, I'd be making excuses for myself. I think I was a bit scared of people's pity. When my mom and dad were divorcing, it was scandalous then to have divorced parents. I remember my friend—her mom and dad divorced when she was about 4 or 5, and she hid it from everyone in her class, until I started to tell people that my mom and dad were divorced. I don't think she had any good reason for it, she just did. We both felt we were the only people in the whole school with divorced parents.

For many children, there is the problem of trying to adjust to their parents finding new partners.



I felt pretty jealous. I mean, after you've had your dad to yourself for a while and then somebody else comes in and your mom shows her love for him rather than you, you get very jealous. And I got jealous. I hated it. I was so nasty. I used to sit in the room and give off nasty vibes or make really underhand comments. I frightened quite a few of them off.

Many children feel that the experience would have been easier to handle if their parents had only explained and discussed more what was happening.

I think parents should talk about it with their kids and see what the kids' points of view are and how they feel about it. And they should talk about how they're going to work it out and get jobs and a new house. Then the kids will be able to understand what is happening. And they should let them know that other people go through this, because we thought we were the only ones.

Group Exercise



Talk about the experiences these children have described. What can you learn from their comments about the difficulties they faced when their parents divorced or separated?

The effects of divorce

You probably feel that the worst thing you can imagine is your parents breaking up. When parents argue and fight in front of children, it is very painful. A child doesn't know what to do and feels that he or she is being split in two. To a child it seems as if the whole world is falling in. If your parents have already separated or divorced, you may feel sad, abandoned and rejected. You may blame yourself for their breakup. If you are older, you may realize that it is a parental affair, but you probably still feel angry, lonely and resentful.

If you are very distressed, your schoolwork may deteriorate and you may become emotionally upset and depressed. You may not feel friendly toward others or to the world at large. You just want to be by yourself and think about what has gone wrong. Sometimes teenagers become romantically involved as they try to compensate for the loss of their parents' love. This can bring about even more problems. It is difficult to cope with such an experience.

If your parents remarry, this too can introduce new challenges. You may or may not like your stepparent. He or she may or may not like and love you. You may feel that if you accept your stepfather, you are betraying your real father. There are a lot of emotions and feelings to be sorted out. Sometimes it seems easier to escape from such things into one's own little world. However, at some point you have to come to terms with your feelings if you are to grow and move forward.



Unfortunately, the likelihood of divorce is much greater for those couples who have come from broken families than those who have come from stable homes. Our parents are our role models. If they behave in a certain way and deal with problems in a certain way, we are prone but not destined to do the same. So if our parents solve their marital problems by divorcing, there is a chance we'll do the same. In order to prevent this, it is advised that you find an alternative source of parental love, such as a mentor, who can support your social and emotional growth.

With whom should I live?

Olga is talking with her best friend, Sveta, in Olga's kitchen. Both girls are seated at the kitchen table.

Olga: (Crying) I love them both, but they can't accept that. They're tearing me apart.

Sveta: What do you mean?

Olga: Well, they hate each other now. That's hard enough anyway, but what's worse is they think I should take sides. If Mom says something bad about Dad, she thinks I should agree. And Dad's the same way.

Sveta: So what will you do?

Olga: I don't know. I can't sleep, I can't eat, and I can't concentrate on anything. My schoolwork is terrible, but I just don't care anymore. I'm just dreading the day when I'll have to make a choice.

Sveta: What kind of choice are you talking about?

Olga: You're lucky, Sveta, you know that? Your mom and dad get along. They really seem to like each other and respect each other. I never really thought about that until ...



Sveta: I guess I am lucky. Funny, isn't it? You never really think about your parents—about their relationship. They're just kind of there.

Olga: I have to choose between them. With whom I want to live, I mean.

Sveta: Won't the court decide?

Olga: No. That would be easier. But since I'm as old as I am, I have to choose. And I love them both, I really do. And one of them is going to be hurt. Still, I have to decide.

Sveta: I'd hate to be in your position. *(Pause)* Maybe if you tried to make a list—you know, pros and cons.

Olga: *(Hurt)* Of my parents? I can't do that. I told you, I love both of them.

Sveta: No, I don't mean that. I mean things like, where will they live? Will you have to change school? Who will keep the apartment—your mom or your dad?

Olga: I don't know.

Sveta: I think you'd better find out. Then you can make the best choice.

Olga: The best choice? Sveta, haven't you been listening?

Sveta: *(Squeezing Olga's hand)* I know it's hard. But the more you know about the situation, the better. And living with one parent doesn't mean you're rejecting the other.

Olga: I guess not.

Sveta: Of course not. You can't be in two places at once. But you can be in two places at different times—you know, weekends, holidays, and so on. Can't you spend that time with the parent you don't live with? You'll work it out. I know you.

Olga: I hope so.



Questions for Discussion



- What consequence of the divorce bothers Olga most?
- What do you think about Sveta's suggestion that Olga make a list?
- What do you think about Sveta's statement "You never really think about your parents. They're just there"?
- Was Sveta right to conclude, "You'll work it out, I know you"? Why might we avoid trying to give simple answers?
- Who suffers more from a divorce—the parents or the children? Can there be such a thing as a "painless" divorce?