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Welcome

Melvin Tann, Mental Health Board Trustee



Welcome to the Fall 2004 issue of “*How’s YOUR Mental Health?*”. The City of St. Louis Mental Health Board of Trustees (MHB) developed this quarterly e-zine to help St. Louis residents become better informed about mental health and substance abuse issues and problems.

Many people know relatively little about these topics, even though an MHB study found that 31 percent of city voters surveyed have an alcoholic in their immediate family, 22 percent have a relative addicted to other drugs and 25 percent have a close relative who is mentally ill. Directly or indirectly, these are problems that touch all of us.

Each edition of “*How’s YOUR Mental Health?*” focuses on a topic that impacts the lives of many St. Louisans. This issue is devoted to the effects of divorce on young children. It begins with a special commentary that provides an overview of the scope of problems children experience and things parents can do to help their adjustment.

The articles that follow the commentary take a more detailed look at the problem. Topics include:

1. Immediate effects of divorce upon young children
2. Long-term effects
3. What divorcing parents should not do
4. What divorcing parents can do to help children deal with changes in the family

MHB hopes you will find these articles and the list of resources that are included informative and useful.

The Effects of Divorce on Young Children

A Special Commentary



In 1970, 3.2 million people in the United States were divorced. A quarter-century later, the number had more than quadrupled to 17.4 million. The fastest-growing marital status category continues to be divorced persons. Depression and mental illness are significantly higher among divorced persons than among those who are married and have never been divorced or those who have never been married. Both of these conditions impact tremendously on other family members, and these are topics on which past MHB publications have focused. But our topic in this issue concerns the effects of divorce on young children.

John Crum, Ph.D.

Provident Counseling

Each year more than a million children in the U.S. experience the breaking up of their family. According to the Federal Reserve Board's 1995 Survey of Consumer Finance, only 42 percent of children age 14 to 18 live in a "first-marriage" family. Half of the children born every year to parents who are married will see their parents divorce before they turn 18.

A Traumatic Experience for Children

Other than the death of a parent, divorce is the most traumatic thing that can happen to a child has to bear. Experts disagree on the age when children are most vulnerable. Some believe the early elementary years are the time when it's most difficult for them to come to terms with their parents' divorce, while others feel preschool youngsters and young teenagers suffer most. There's also a great deal of research indicating that years after a divorce, when people in their late teens and early twenties are attempting to form meaningful relationships of their own, the fears and doubts they experienced as children often return with new intensity. A study at the University of North Carolina found that, ten years after their parents divorced, young people still felt sorrow, their physical health was poorer than that of children in intact families and they had persistent emotional problems. The results of research at Arizona State University indicated that the effects of divorce on children were intensified if one or both parents moved more than an hour's drive from the original home. Stability in school and neighborhood and ongoing relationships with extended family members is obviously important to a child's well being.



When considering whether – or when – to divorce, parents should realize that just because they are unhappy in their marriage, children may not be. When considering

what's best for children, the decision should be based on whether adults' unhappiness is affecting their ability to be good parents. Research indicates that, five years later, couples who considered divorce but stayed together were much happier than before and reported that their marriages were good. Of course, if there is physical abuse of spouse and/or children, there should be no hesitation in removing the children from the situation.

All Children Suffer Emotional Injuries

Whatever their age when the breakup occurs, **all** children of divorce suffer emotional injuries, and those who exhibit the fewest outward effects may be the most seriously damaged. Even if the parent who leaves the family was mentally or physically abusive, children grieve over their absence and wish they'd return. Fear of change, sadness and grief, anger, denial and guilt are common emotions. Even children too young to put their thoughts and fears into words often feel guilty when their parents divorce. Both parents need to reassure them that this is not the case – that divorce, like marriage, is adult business and that, regardless of how parents feel about one another, their love of their children will not change.

It's estimated that only a small percent of youngsters trying to cope with feelings that may cripple them throughout their lives have the opportunity to talk with a professional counselor. Parents, consumed with their own bitterness, sadness – and often severe depression – may fail to recognize the depth of their children's emotional upheaval or may mistakenly assume that "they're young, and they'll get over it." At a time when children most need support and reassurance, parents may be unable to provide it. Because it's a sad, hurtful topic for adults, they may think it will make children feel worse if they bring it up, but youngsters need to be reassured that it's okay to talk about their feelings. Boys, especially, may need extra encouragement and support to express their sadness.

Unexpressed Emotions May Cause Life-long Problems

If they are not encouraged to let their emotions surface so they can work through and resolve them, they may not be able, as adults, to set and achieve goals, feel at ease when they are alone or show empathy to others, because they never received it themselves. In the July 1993 issue of *Journal of Family Psychology*, Mavis Herrington's overview of the "Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage" notes that ninety percent of adolescent boys and girls in intact families were within the normal range in terms of difficulty in school, behavior problems, negative self-concepts, problems with peers and trouble getting along with their parents. In divorced families, twenty-six percent of the boys and thirty-four percent of the girls were in the problematic range.

Recent Census Bureau statistics indicate that fatherless homes account for:

- 63% of youth suicides

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- 90% of all homeless and runaway children
- 85% of all children who exhibit behavioral disorders
- 80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger
- 71% of all high school dropouts
- 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions
- 85% of all youths in prison
- 70% of long-term prison inmates

This data, if nothing else, should cause parents considering divorce to pause and consider the possible consequences for their children.

Weigh Consequences Against 'Children's Bill of Rights'

Those who decide that divorce is the best choice for their family should keep in mind this "Children's Bill of Rights," included in the booklet, "Stepping Back from Anger," published by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers:

1. You have the right to love both your parents.
2. You do not have to choose one parent over the other.
3. You're entitled to all the feelings you're having.
4. You have the right to be in a safe environment.
5. You don't belong in the middle of your parents' break-up.
6. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are still part of your life.
7. You have the right to be a child

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heritage.org
"The Effects of Divorce on Children,"
Robert Hughes, Jr.,
The Ohio State University web site
"Children's Reactions,"
Elissa Benedek, M.D., and Catherine Brown, M.Ed.
divorcemag.com
"Children & Divorce: The Effects of Divorce on Children,"
divorcesource.com
"Becoming a Bachelor Parent,"
Thomas Hoerner,
divorcemag.com

Things Divorcing Parents Do That Make the Situation More Difficult for Children

In an article titled "Stupid Parent Tricks" posted on divorcemag.com, the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) list the results of a survey on the biggest mistakes divorcing couples with children make. In order of frequency they are:

- Denigrating the other spouse
- Using the child as a messenger
- Interfering with visitation rights
- Sharing intimate details of the other spouse's infidelity, behavior, etc.
- Failing to pay support/adequately supporting the children
- Introducing the children immediately to the parent's new love interest
- Moving the child as far away as possible from the other parent
- Listening to the child's conversations with the other parent
- Having the child read all the legal pleadings or having him or her contact the lawyer
- Having the child request money from the other spouse

In a second article, titled "Stupid Parent Tricks (Part Two)," lawyers who participated in the survey cited some of the worst examples of parental misconduct they'd witnessed:

- Fleeing a jurisdiction with an infant, changing names and saying the mother was dead
- Forcing children to testify in custody proceedings
- Causing the arrest of the spouse, then photographing the spouse in handcuffs and showing the photo to the kids
- Using false allegations of child sexual abuse to gain custody of the kids and/or the favor of the court

Sam was a respected elementary school principal in a closely-knit rural community whose ex-wife, angry because he'd remarried happily, accused him of molesting their pre-school daughter during visits with her father. Although Sam was completely exonerated and the real perpetrator (of whom the mother had been aware all along) was identified, Sam's career in education was destroyed and his relationship with his daughter damaged because of the long period of time he was prevented from having any contact with her.



Fighting in Front of Children Is Wrong

Experts say that one of the biggest mistakes divorced parents make is continuing to fight in front of their children. If they must vent their anger and bitterness, it should be to another adult, never to a child. If the relationship is still so volatile that contact between the parents is apt to turn ugly, children should be picked up and dropped off at neutral public locations.

Parents should avoid “putting the child in the middle” by demanding his/her total loyalty, grilling the child about what’s going on in the other parent’s household, complaining about the inadequacy of financial support or keeping the child from spending time with the non-custodial parent as punishment for late support checks.

Research has indicated that only a small percentage of children experiencing the trauma of divorce have the opportunity to talk with a professional who could help them deal with their feelings. Parents who fail to provide this option for their child may be compounding and extending the trauma. Similarly, parents who fail to invite the child to talk openly about his/her feelings or who choose to confide their own anger and anxiety to the child are doing a great disservice.

Parents who are inconsistent in discipline and supportiveness of the child because of their own current emotional state add to the child’s confusion and instability. Likewise, it is wrong for one parent to shower the child with presents, activities and trips that the other parent can’t afford.

Perhaps most damaging to children’s emotional well-being is suggesting that they are in some way responsible for the divorce or criticizing them by saying, “You’re just like your father/mother.” Josh was ten when his grandmother, after attending a school program, said to him, “You looked just like your father standing up there on the stage.” She undoubtedly met it as a compliment, for his father was a handsome man. But Josh had never had any contact with his father, and although there had been no criticism of him by close family members, he sensed he was not an admired person. Fifty years later, he remembers his reply to his grandmother, “That’s not a very nice thing to say!”

Material cited from these sources:

“Divorce Doesn’t Have to Mean a House Divided,”
St. Louis Children’s Hospital
“Stupid Parent Tricks,”
American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers
divorcemag.com
“Stupid Parent Tricks (Part Two),”
American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers
divorcemag.com

Positive Things Parents Can Do To Help Children

Once parents decide to divorce, they should plan to tell their children together, as calmly as possible. They should not be surprised if the children don't seem shocked, especially if there has been obvious conflict in the home for a period of time. This does not mean, however, that children won't have questions, that they won't be tremendously upset once their suspicions have been confirmed or that they won't need support and reassurance from both parents.

This initial discussion should be limited to the most important and immediate issues – the children's basic needs will be met, both parents will continue to love them, the divorce is not their fault and as much of their regular routine as possible will remain the same. The information should be age-appropriate and, in the beginning, not more than the children can absorb without being confused. Parents should kindly, but firmly, let children know that the decision to divorce is final.



After the children have had time to think about the announcement, the entire family should meet again to talk about questions that have arisen and, especially, to listen carefully to what children have to say. It is important for children to feel that parents recognize the impact of the divorce on their young lives.

Open Communication Is a Necessity

Open lines of communication between parents and children are absolutely necessary during and after a divorce. Children should be asked often about their fears and concerns.

Parents often feel that if children don't bring up the subject, it will make them feel worse if parents do so, but kids often have to be reminded and reassured that it's okay to talk about their feelings. Establishing an atmosphere of open discussion at this point may also make it easier for parents and children to talk frankly about other topics, such as experimentation with drugs or sex, that arise later. If children are reluctant to talk about their feelings, the parent can look for age-appropriate books they can read and discuss together. A suggested list is included in the resource section of this issue.

In "Building a Happier Future," an article in divorcemag.com, M. Gary Neuman and Patricia Romanowski note that open communication sometimes "opens a Pandora's box." When a child – alone or with the help of a therapist – suddenly feels free to express his/her anger toward or disappointment with parents, it forces parents to acknowledge the problem and deal with it. As one parent said, "Before, I didn't have to stop and talk to him or deal with what he was feeling. I almost convinced myself

sometimes that he was really handling it well. Now it's right there. I've got to deal with it, and it's a lot more work."

So long as parents don't make the child feel responsible for "cheering them up," it's also all right to let children know that parents, too, feel sad sometimes and wish the family could be the way it once was. In fact, when a parent handles anger, stress or sadness in a positive way, it can serve as a valuable example for children who have similar feelings.

Many Children Blame Themselves

Many children older than four or five have persistent feelings that the divorce was their fault. When questioned, they may say it happened because they were naughty or made bad grades. Repeated reassurance from both parents is needed to convince them that they are not responsible and that, while the parents no longer want to be married, their love for their children will never change.



Children should be helped to understand, especially if there has been much discord in the family, that life will be calmer and happier. They should be reminded that they can still spend time with the non-custodial parent and that they still have many other supportive and loving family members and friends. Pleasant, familiar routines should continue. Even things as simple as cleaning house together on weekends, ordering pizza on Saturday nights and going to the park on Sunday afternoons can be comforting and reassuring that life goes on. Whenever possible, a positive spin should be put on changes in the child's life. For example, it can be pointed out that now he/she will have two Christmas and birthday celebrations, rather than one.

If a child's behavior regresses to such earlier things as bedwetting, thumb sucking or clinging, parents should be understanding and supportive. The child can be encouraged to talk about anything that's bothering him/her. If the problem continues, appropriate medical help should be sought. In this situation, as well as the child's everyday life, it's especially important at this time that both parents handle it in the same way.

Many Parents Experience Depression

Research indicates that as many as thirty percent of custodial parents experience severe depression, which affects parenting. The burden of suddenly becoming a single parent can be more than some people can bear. They should not be slow to seek support from relatives and friends, but they should be aware that the divorce may cause some of these people to "take sides," withdrawing support that was previously there.

No matter what brought about the divorce, parents should speak well of their former spouse in front of the children. If the relationship can remain cordial, the child will benefit greatly. A local doctor bought a home just a block away from where he had lived with his former wife so that their children could easily access both parents. When he

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remarried, the new and former spouses became close friends, often taking their children on vacations together, even when the doctor couldn't join them. Now he jokes that when the women go shopping, "one is spending my paycheck and the other my child-support check. I can't win." The children, however, are certainly winners!

Material cited from these sources:

"Focus on Kids: The Effects of Divorce on Children,"

Karen DeBord, Ph.D.

North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service

"Children and Divorce"

notmykid.org

"The Effects of Divorce on Children; A Potential Cause for Bedwetting,"

Carma Haley Shoemaker

preschoolerstoday.com

"Children,"

M. Gary Neuman and Patricia Romanowski

divorcemag.com

"How, What and When to Tell the Kids About Your Divorce,"

Teri Morrison

divorcemag.com

"Helping Children Understand Divorce,"

Sara Gable and Kelly Cole

muextension.missouri.edu

"Two Homes for the Holidays,"

Karen Grais Meyer, MSW, LCSW

divorcemag.com

Long-term Effects of Divorce on Children

Research at the University of North Carolina found evidence that, while most children are not permanently traumatized by their parents' divorce, there is evidence that they are affected in some ways throughout their lives. Those interviewed ten years after the divorce still felt sorrow, their physical health was poorer than that of students in intact families and they had persistent emotional problems.



These problems included: continuing fears of betrayal, abandonment, loss and rejection; anger, resentment and hostility; depression; and a general reduction in psychological well-being. The study found that for many of those in their late teens and early twenties, feelings and memories about their parents' divorce returned with new intensity as they entered adulthood.

Anne, now 70 years old, was an infant when her parents divorced, but still remembers how strange she felt as the only child in her elementary school class whose parents were divorced. She recalls that it was difficult for her mother to find a teaching job to support them because of the stigma in the 1930s against married – let alone divorced – female teachers. She remembers the rudeness of some adults who asked where her father was and the indignity of having to find someone to accompany her to father-daughter activities at church. And she remembers how her mother, a faithful church goer and Sunday school teacher, stayed home one Sunday each year when the minister preached on the sin of divorce.

Depression May Linger Long After Divorce

In 1971, Judith Wallerstein, a clinical psychologist, began a study of the effects of divorce on 131 children from middle-class families in the San Francisco area. Five years after their parents' divorce, more than one-third of the children experienced moderate or severe depression. At ten years, Wallerstein found, "the now young men and women appeared to be troubled, drifting and underachieving." Five years later, many were struggling to establish strong love relationships of their own. As was the case with the North Carolina study, Wallerstein found that the long-term effects of divorce emerge when young adults are trying to make their own decisions about love, marriage and family.

Nicholas Zil, a social scientist, found that children from disrupted families are almost twice as likely to leave high school before graduation. Research by Sara McLanahan, a Princeton sociologist, found that Caucasian girls from single-parent families are 53 percent more likely to marry in their teens, 92 percent more likely to end a marriage in

divorce, 111 percent more likely to give birth before they're 20 and 164 percent more likely to have children out of wedlock. For African American girls, the figures are even higher.

Penn State researchers David Eggebeen and Daniel Lichter say that changes in family structure caused more than half of the increase in child poverty in the 1980s. They also say that child poverty would be one-third lower than it is now if family structure had stayed the same since 1960.

Wallerstein notes that much of the litigation over custody and visitation agreements presumes that parent-child relationships will remain the same after a divorce. "Unfortunately," she says, "the courts and the embattled partners and their attorneys have focused on imposing restrictions and strict conditions that further encumber a relationship that, even under the best circumstances, needs encouragement."

Parents' Long-distance Move from Home Has Negative Effects



Research by psychologists at Arizona State University, conducted with 602 college students, indicated that those from families where one or both parents moved more than an hour's drive from the original home after the divorce suffered significant negative effects in terms of psychological and emotional adjustment, general life satisfaction, current health status, their relationship to and among the parents and their perceptions about having lived "a hard life."

Students from families in which a parent moved received less financial support from their parents, worried more about the lack of support, felt more hostility in their interpersonal relations, suffered more distress related to their parents' divorce and perceived their parents less favorably as sources of emotional support and as role models. The subjects' perceptions of financial problems are accurate. In "The Effects of Divorce on America," Patrick Fagan and Robert Rector state that families with children that were not poor before the divorce see their income drop as much as fifty percent afterward and that almost half of families with children that are going through a divorce move into poverty.

Most divorced parents go on to other romantic relationships and many remarry. Aside from the obvious problems of the children involved in terms of jealousy of their parent's attention to a new spouse and uncertainty about their role in the new family structure, research indicates that children in step-families are 40 times more likely to be victims of sexual abuse, although not usually by the stepfather. Obviously, being a child of divorce is not easy. The articles that follow provide information about what parents should and should not do to make it easier for their children to deal with the situation.

Material cited from these sources:

"The Effects of Divorce on Middle-class U.S. Children,"
menweb.org

“Children in Crisis,”
Robin Brown, ed., The Reference Shelf, 1994
The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study,”
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”Effects of Divorce on the Visiting Father-Child Relationship,”
J.S. Wallerstein and J.B. Kelley,
American Journal of Psychiatry, December 1980
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May Lead to Long-term Problems, Study Suggests,”
APA Online
“Successful Stepfamilies,”
Jeffrey Cottrill, divorcemag.com
“Long-term Effects of Divorce on Children,”
North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension
“An Exploration of the Ramifications of
Divorce on Children and Adolescents,”
childadvocate.net

Resources:



Web sites

<http://www.heritage.org>
<http://www.divorcemag.com>
<http://www.divorcesource.com>
<http://www.parenthoodweb.com>
<http://www.extension.umn.edu> (University of Minnesota Extension Service)
<http://www.theparentreport.com>
<http://www.childadvocate.net>
<http://www.apa.org> (American Psychological Association)
<http://www.menweb.org>
<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu> (North Carolina State University Cooperation Extension)
<http://www.fatherhood.about.com>
<http://www.notmykid.org>
<http://www.preschoolerstoday.com>
<http://www.smaartmarriages.com>
<http://www.bridge-comm.com>
<http://www.cheathouse.com>
<http://www.smartmarriages.com>
<http://www.stanford.edu> (Stanford University)
<http://www.vermontjudiciary.org>
<http://www.ces.purdue.edu> (Purdue University)
<http://www.aaml.org> (American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers)
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu> (Department of Family Relations and Human Development, The Ohio State University)
<http://www.divorcesupport.com>

Books for Preschoolers and Early Elementary Children

All About Divorce, Mary Blitzer Field, The Center for Applied Psychology, Inc.
Always, Always, Crescent Dragonwagon, MacMillan
Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide to Changing Families, Laurene and Marc Brown, Little Brown
Free to Be . . . A Family: A Book About All Kinds of Belongings, Marlo Thomas, Bantam
Why Are We Getting a Divorce?, Peter Mayle, Crown Publishing
Months of Sundays, R. Blue, Franklin Wafts, Inc.
I Don't Want to Talk About It, Jeanie Franz Ransom and Kathryn Kunz Finney

Books for Adolescents and Early Teens

Angel Face, Norma Klein, Viking
The Divorce Express, Paula Danziger, Delacorte
How It Feels When Parents Divorce, Jill Krementz, Knopf
Divorce Workbook: Guide for Kids and Families, Sally B. Ives
Kids' Divorce Workbook : A Practical Guide That Helps Kids Understand Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids, Michael S. Prokop
It's Not the End of the World, Judy Blume, MacMillan
Talking About Divorce: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child, Ead Groliman, Beacon
What's Going to Happen to Me When Parents Separate or Divorce, Eda LeShan, Four Winds
Divorce, A. Gruasell
When Mom and Dad Divorce, S. Nickman
How to Get It Together when Your Parents Are Coming Apart, A. K. Richards and I. Willis

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Books for Parents

Divorce Workbook: Guide for Kids and Families, Sally B. Ives

The Divorced Dad's Survival Book, David Knox, Ph.D., and Kermit Legget

Be a Great Divorced Dad, Dr. Kenneth Condrell and Linda Small

Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-parenting, M. Mulroy, C.Z. Malley, R.M. Sabatelli and R. Waldron, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System

One of the most thorough and touching accounts of the way divorce affected one teenage boy is the book, Within a Child's Heart, written by Craig Henry Leibel of Alberta, Canada, when he was 28 – 13 years after his parents' divorce. A happily-married adult when he wrote the book, Leibel shares his thoughts, feelings and experiences as a child whose world was rocked to its foundations – and how he worked past the grief and anger to create a deeply satisfying life. You can read an excerpt from the book on the Internet at <http://www.DivorceMagazine.com/library/children/childsheart.html>

The American Association of Matrimonial Lawyers has produced a video and booklet, "Stepping Back from Anger," which can be ordered by calling 800-422-6595.

Citizens for Missouri's Children www.mokids.org	314-647-2003
National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities www.nichcy.org	1-800-695-0285
National Mental Health Association www.nmha.org	1-800-969-NMHA
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org	1-202-966-7300
Council for Exceptional Children http://ericec.org	1-800-328-0272
Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health www.ffcmh.org	703-684-7710
National Clearinghouse on Family Support and Children's Mental Health www.rtc.pdx.edu/	1-800-628-1696
Behavioral Health Response (BHR) 24-hour crisis hotline staffed by professional counselor www.bhrstl.org	314-469-6644
City of St. Louis Mental Health Board of Trustees www.stlmhb.com	314-535-6964
City of St. Louis Mental Health Board Comment Line	314-658-3603
Help with Gambling	1 800 BETS OFF
Life Crisis Service 24-hour hotline staffed by trained volunteers www.lifecrisis.org	314-647-4357

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