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The Greatest Thing You Can Do For Your Children—And Yourself

By Kenneth A. Sprang

Years ago in the early years of my first marriage, I lived in Davison, Michigan, where I met a wonderful clergyman, Walter Fitton. On Walt's desk was a plaque that read, "The greatest thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother."

I was reminded of the plaque a few years ago in Florida, when my wife Carol was working with a difficult couple. After a few sessions, however, it became clear that the couple had already divorced emotionally and they had no interest in working to save their marriage. They were primarily worried about their 12-year old daughter, who was showing signs of depression and acting out at home and school.

The couple abruptly stopped their couples therapy one day, announcing that their sole concern was for their daughter, and they wanted therapy just for her. Sadly, they could see no nexus between their constant squabbling and the icy atmosphere that enveloped their home and the well being of their daughter.

A seven-year study by the Timbertown Psychiatric Institute in Dallas found that the most important factor in helping children become healthy, happy adults is the quality of the relationship between their parents--a factor more important than giving children hugs, providing good discipline, building self-esteem, or any other aspect of what we generally consider good parenting.

When failed relationships lead to divorce, the children suffer most. In her landmark study, Judith Wallerstein (as well as others) found that children of divorce suffer long-term emotional consequences. She found that one-third of the children studied were still experiencing moderate to severe depression five years after the divorce, and 15 years later many were experiencing the consequences of the break-up as they began love relationships and marriages of their own. The common fears were betrayal, rejection, and repetition of their parents' "failure."

On the other hand, the research shows that children who live with parents who are constantly at war with one another fare even worse. Divorce is an unfortunate reality of our modern world, but sometimes it is the best or even the only solution. The secret then is for divorced parents to learn to communicate.

Amazingly, there are many who refuse to recognize the importance of this simple skill. I have been continuously frustrated when working with clients whose former spouses refuse to participate in counseling—not to try to repair the relationship, but to free the couple to move forward in their lives alone and—*most importantly*—to build a positive and cooperative relationship for the sake of the children. My frustration changes to exasperation when divorced parents use children as pawns in an ongoing war with their former spouse.

Judith Wallerstein found that after 10 or even 15 years following their divorce, nearly half of the men and women studied had not given up the hopes and disappointments of their previous marriage. Half of the women and one-third of the men were still intensely angry with their former spouse ten years after the divorce.

Persons who carry such anger hurt themselves, for they can never fully move forward into their new life until they let go of the anger. It is not unlike leaving a disease untreated. Moreover, the children who suffer most are the children of divorce whose parents carry such anger and continue their fighting and legal battles, often using the children as pawns in the battle.

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As a friend once wisely said to me when my first marriage of 25 years ended, “Ken and Viera got a divorce—Mom and Dad did not.” It is important to remember that and to seek to heal the wounds and learn to communicate. This communication work is not about mediation or negotiation—it is about learning to find common ground and to respect one another as the parents of our children.

In our practice, we use Imago Relationship Therapy, because it 1) helps couples understand why they “push one another’s buttons”; 2) it teaches them ways to communicate that makes the communication emotionally safe and built on mutual respect; and 3) it is designed to be short term.

If your relationship is unraveling, I urge you to seek help—for the children’s sake. If you are divorced or in the process of a divorce (or ending a committed relationship), I urge you to take care of yourself by seeking help in letting go of your anger and the relationship. If there are children involved, then communication work is essential. Remember that the greatest thing you can do for your children is to love—or at least respect—their other parent.

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