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The Journey Continues: Life After Divorce—Saving the Children
Part II
By Kenneth A. Sprang

Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart.

Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.

--Carl Jung

In the first column of this series, I wrote about beginning the road to healing after divorce, and I briefly addressed the treatment of children in divorce. In this column, I would like to continue our conversation r about “saving the children” from divorce.

The research is clear, and anecdotal observations will confirm it, that divorce is not generally desirable for children. There are volumes of empirical literature on the subject, but a pragmatic look helps us to understand why. When Mom and Dad divorce, the nuclear family that the child has known for a lifetime disappears. The Christmas mornings, the Passover celebrations, the extended family gatherings, the daily kisses goodnight from both parents, are gone.

Mom and Dad each have a chance to move on to build a new healthy and fulfilling life—they can recover and find the lost happiness. But for the children it is different. Among other things, for the rest of their lives they will have to decide with whom they will spend what part of the holidays or their birthdays, and who will sit where at graduation, their wedding, or a bar mitzvah.

That is *not* to say that couples whose relationship has become one of icy co-existence or daily conflict should stay together “for the sake of the children.” Generally speaking, children who grow up in such toxic environments are likely to be worse off than those whose parents divorce. Sadly, divorce is sometimes a necessary alternative. It is *not* necessary, however, for parents to their anger and conflict to poison their children.

Recently I attended a meeting of parents going through divorce. I was appalled to hear of some of the tactics of custodial parents. In one case, for example, the custodial parent fabricated stories of abuse in order to obtain immediate suspension of visitation. In another, a mother asserted that the child was depressed because of treatment by the father (even though the child had been depressed since the beginning of the divorce) and that the father suffered a severe mental condition, in order to suspend visitation. The true victims in such cases are not the former spouse, but the children.

The challenge for divorcing or divorced parents is how to best care for their children in light of the divorce and how to separate their own emotions and journey of healing from that of the child. As I wrote in the last column start with the premise that you and your partner have gotten a divorce, “Mom and Dad did not.” You are and always will be the only mother or father your children will ever have.

Consider the following suggestions:

- Process the divorce with the child in an age appropriate manner. The child needs to understand what is happening. Most importantly, reassure the child repeatedly, that the divorce is not the child’s fault (children not infrequently make that assumption, thinking that had they behaved better the divorce would not have happened).

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- *Never* malign or criticize the other parent or blame the divorce on that parent. First, divorce is a two way street. When marriages fail, both partners carry some level of responsibility. Current research suggests that the only difference between successful marriages and unsuccessful ones is that some couples have tools and resources that others do not.
- Work as hard at nurturing and encouraging a loving, nurturing relationship between your child and the other parent, as you do building such a relationship with the child yourself.
- Do everything you can to cooperate with your child's other parent around the child and the child's needs.
- Engage the non-custodial parent in major decisions affecting the child, to the extent reasonably possible. Do not isolate the other parent from educational, health, and similar decisions. Remember the goal is to keep the child's relationship with both parents as normal as possible.
- Re-image your former spouse as the father or mother of your child. He or she may have been a poor spouse, but still a good parent. Think of your child's father or mother, rather than your "ex." Remember that you loved that other parent once and together you brought a precious life into the world.
- Get help from a parent counselor or coach, if you cannot resolve the conflicts and differences with the child's other parent. A good counselor or coach will help you process the emotions that give rise to the conflicts so that you can learn to work together for the good of your child.
- Remember that harboring anger and bitterness toward your child's other parent will, in the long run, hurt you and your child far more than the other parent.

Ken Sprang and his wife Carol practice in Bethesda, where they offer coaching and counseling for parents, families, couples, and individuals, as well as divorce mediation. For more information on resources for parents, email ken@bccounseling.com. Bethesda-Chevy Chase Counseling & Consulting, (301) 907-3377. www.bcccounseling.com