

UNEXPECTED
LEGACY
of
DIVORCE



A 25 YEAR
LANDMARK STUDY



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that the children are not given a moral compass by which to steer through problems in their own marriages. They are seriously misled about the nature of the man-woman relationship and the responsibility of a parent to his or her children. We know that this happens after divorce, but it is also common in intact families. I have seen it a lot in my clinical experience. Whenever tensions arise, the urge to scapegoat is powerful.

The Decision to Divorce—Telling the Children

NOW LET'S ASK a critical question. Suppose you choose to end your marriage. Taking Gary's father as a role model of a good parent who understands how to speak to his children about very painful issues, how should you conduct yourself? Here, too, there are clear do's and don'ts that are rarely followed because parents are poorly informed, raging, or overwhelmed by the demands of life at the time of the breakup. Typically, they have reached a point of no return in a marriage that is intolerable to them. The situation is unlikely ever to improve. Individual histories vary. Divorce at a young age is different from divorce after spending half or a whole lifetime together. But most divorces reflect a dream that was shattered because of profound disappointment, suffering in the relationship, and the end of hope for a better future. Most of the time people with children take this step reluctantly. Many do so after intense conflict within themselves. It's a terrifying decision because there's no way back as you step across the Rubicon onto an unknown continent.

But as much as divorced couples may want to wipe the slate clean as parents, they cannot. Children are a permanent legacy of the marriage. If anything, a parent's responsibility for them is greater than before. The children have a right to know why their parents decided to divorce and what changes the divorce will set in motion. This is what they will take with them as they grow up, working and reworking every nuance of every message you send. At each developmental stage children of divorce reassess their understanding of the divorce. They rehash it when they're grown and have children of their own and face their own crises. Conversations done fully and well will protect your child, just as Gary's father protected his son. If these discussions are done poorly or don't happen at all, the child is left to figure everything out on his own. Being left in the dark with a problem that is too big to understand increases a child's anxiety profoundly.

In my many years of working with divorced families, I'm sorry to say that few parents have such conversations with their children. Most youngsters are told essentially nothing about the parents' struggle and reasons to decide on divorce—no explanations of the inner struggle, no mention of the reluctance, sorrow, and inability to tolerate any more. It's as if the divorce came out of the blue. No one says a word. This means that the child, especially the preschool child, often learns about the divorce in the most traumatic way possible when she wakes up one morning to find that her father and his belongings have vanished into thin air.

It doesn't have to be this way, but it takes thoughtfulness and time for divorcing parents to help their children. Let's assume for the moment that you are the one getting divorced. What should you do? First, gather the children together and tell them that you have decided to separate and what that means and when it will happen. Talk simply, slowly, and keep in mind that they will remember forever what you are saying. They'll also remember what you don't say. Choose a quiet time when you and the children have plenty of time, that is, not when homework is pending or when you are flying off in the morning on a business trip. Turn off the TV and the computer and make clear that you expect to stay home and be available for the rest of the day and evening. Tell them why this is happening and how sorry you both are for you and for them. Explain that when you got married you loved each other and hoped to live together for your whole lives. Go out of your way to talk about the dream you had when you married and how happy you were when the children were born. Why? Because you want the children to feel that they were born into a loving family and that they were wanted. You want to offset their notion, which can gnaw at them over time, that they were born in anger and are leftovers from a marriage no one wanted. Speak to their self-esteem and keep in mind that you're talking about the relationship between a man and a woman that will shape their lives. Tell them honestly how reluctant you are to call it quits, how hard you tried. If you went to a therapist, minister, or rabbi for help, say so. Don't deprecate or scapegoat each other. Because you and your spouse cannot make the marriage work, and things between you can only get worse, say you've decided to divorce for everyone's sake. You don't want them to grow up with the wrong view of what marriage is. You don't want to live a lie or mislead them into thinking that your failing marriage is the best that marriage provides. It isn't.

Then ask what they understand about divorce. Ask about their friends' experiences. Let them speak. Let them tell you about their worry of losing you, about their strange ideas of having to be put in a foster home, about children not having funds to go to college. They may be full of bad information and you can correct them gently. Some children will be frozen into silence. Try to help them say what they're scared of or relieved about. After all, you know them well. Remember that whether or not they speak, every child will have a mind that is spinning fast forward. They will all be worried, some realistically, some exaggeratedly. Keep in mind that there are no empty spaces in their minds. Even when they say "I don't know," they can have ideas that are too scary to articulate. Keep in mind that they'll try with all their might to protect you, that they're just as worried about you as you are about them, and that they may happily lie to you about what they feel if they think it will comfort you.

Then tell them what plans you are making and ask for response and input. Leave it open and tentative. Be sure to give them some real choices. The worst is when they feel like inanimate objects that are just distributed between two homes. This feeling of having no choice can lead to a combination of anger and powerlessness that has long-term effects on their initiative later in life. Tell them soberly that adults who divorce one another continue to love and care for their children until the children are grown. Talk about good plans and what you'll do together. But don't get carried away. Schedule another meeting to discuss future plans after everyone has had a chance to think, so you can mutually explore what's possible.

Most of all, you need to tell your children that divorce is very sad for both of you and that you are very sorry. Keep in mind that this is one of the saddest days in any child's life and nothing will save you from having to face it. Level with them that things will be discombobulated for a while, but that you promise to keep them informed. End by saying how much you all need to help each other. Talk about courage, that you all need to try not to be cranky, but it's okay to cry and be angry. You may all slip, but it's important to try.

At the next meeting tell them what's happening and when things will be settled. Talk about plans for the future and how you will implement them. At this meeting tell them that sometimes children blame themselves. They think that they're responsible for the breakup and that if they weren't here Dad and Mom would get along fine. Say that the

trouble is between you, the parents, and that they didn't do it and that they can't fix it. Assure them again that they are still a very good part of the marriage. Tell them again about plans for parents and children—where you and they will live, changes in parents' schedules, changes in theirs. Make sure you talk about your concern for continuity in their interests in teams, after-school activities, staying close to best friends. Be honest about disruptions and moves. Make a date to show them where Dad and Mom will be living and plan the first visit together. Obviously, this kind of talk should stretch out over time. Many parts will need to be repeated because children can't hear everything the first or second time. And of course, the style, language, and timing of all these messages should be matched to the child's age and capacity to understand.

What will you accomplish? Like Gary's father, you will be providing an example of moral behavior in which every family member receives full consideration. As you and your spouse express your sorrow, the children will not feel constrained to disguise their angry and frightened feelings. They'll learn that parents in crisis can be trusted not to disappear but to be reliable and available as before, perhaps even more so. They'll feel that their interests and concerns have not been forgotten and they will have received permission from both of you to love you both, to be angry at both, and to cry.

Will this or any intervention counteract the effects of divorce or the years spent in a troubled marriage? Of course not. But it will go far in muting the children's fears, suffering, and loneliness at the crisis. It will set the stage for a new relationship in which parents protect their children by conveying that they continue to be in control, that the children continue to be protected, that the parents have made a difficult decision for which they take responsibility, and that no one in this family is a helpless victim of bad luck or the behavior of a villainous spouse.

Parents taking either path—those who decide to stay together in a troubled marriage and those who decide on divorce—will both convey to the listening child how much they value marriage and family. In both circumstances, they will have shown their capacity to deal honestly and bravely with life's problems, sharing the hard-won wisdom that human relationships are both bitter and sweet. Most of all, they will have made clear to the child and future adult what family is about. All of us need courage and the will to keep trying.

Are all divorcing parents capable of this? Of course not. No one

knows better than I how difficult this assignment is for angry, unhappy, even tormented people to do. However, I'm repeatedly surprised by how much parents are willing to do if they're convinced that it's in their children's interest. I have no doubt that many parents can have honest conversations with their children, whether they decide to leave or stay in a troubled marriage.

To Stay or Go

I LOOKED BACK at Gary. "Tell me, do you think your parents were right to stay in the marriage or should they have divorced? How would it have been different for you?"

"Wow, that's a humdinger."

"You mean you haven't thought about it?"

"As a matter of fact I have. For me it was definitely better that they stayed together. But that's because they were great parents. My brother, sister, and I had a good home. We never doubted that they loved us. I'll never really know if Dad was unfaithful. My mom was lonely and, as I look back, probably depressed, but she continued to be very interested in us and our schoolwork and our activities. We never doubted that we'd go on to college with substantial financial support or even to grad school if we opted for that. In other words, our world was protected. But if they *had* split up, I'd lay you bets that my father would have been remarried in a flash. And maybe had a couple more kids. We would have definitely lost out."

"How?"

"I can imagine that if my dad had a new wife and kids, he wouldn't have been around for me. I doubt that my mom would have remarried, although who knows? Maybe she'd have been happier with a different guy. I imagine she would. So to answer your question, of course it was better for me and my brother and sister to have a stable place and good parents, even if our folks missed out on some goodies of life. I know that's selfish of me."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I have no idea how unhappy my parents were or whether they had regrets. After all, there are a lot of other things in life besides kids. I would have liked to see them both happier with their lives. Now that I'm an adult, I feel terribly sorry for both of them."

Gary makes a very important distinction between the competing interests of parents and children in unhappy marriages. When people stay together or decide to split, what do children gain or lose and what does each parent gain or lose? These are not abstract questions. They translate differently for each family depending on a variety of circumstances. If parenting has been poor, the household is in shambles, and the marriage is hopelessly unhappy, there seems little advantage to anyone to maintaining the status quo. The only way children will be helped is if one parent uses the divorce, over time, to rebuild his or her life with a good home and gives the children the role model of one who finds courage to make a better life. But if parenting has been good, as in Gary's family, children stand to lose enormously from divorce. Clearly they are better off if the unhappy parents stay married and learn to accept their mutual disappointment. Ideally, parents will find a way to patch their relationship enough so that good parenting is maintained. If children had the vote, almost all would vote to maintain their parents' marriage.

What do parents gain or lose from divorce or staying unhappily married? Obviously, no one from the outside can tell people what to do. This is one of the most important decisions a person can make. No one has the right to tell an unhappy woman to give up her chance at love and sexual fulfillment because motherhood is more important, nor does anyone have the moral right to tell a troubled man, living with a woman who demeans him and breaks his heart, to stay put because his children need him in their daily lives. But we can tell men and women how demanding parenting will be in the postdivorce family. We can document that the postdivorce years for most adults are far harder than anyone ever anticipates. Remarriage with children brings advantages and new problems that boggle the imagination. Most of all, we can tell them that parenting takes a lot more time, energy, and devotion in the postdivorce family and that they had better be prepared to undertake it along with rebuilding their own lives.

The most important take-home lesson from Gary and others raised in troubled intact marriages is that the children feel protected and relatively content if the parents are able to maintain good parenting. This finding speaks directly to parents who are thinking about divorce. Are your children doing well despite your unhappiness?