Divorce and its effects on children and adolescents

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“Divorce is a solution and a problem”

(Judith S Wallerstein)
Divorce

- Divorce is almost a “normative event”

It is expected that about 50% of children and adolescents will experience the parent’s separation and divorce in their childhood

Not as rare and scandalous event as in previous generations
Separation and divorce

- Many couples attempt separation and reunions before finally divorcing.
- Divorce has multiple dimensions:
  - Family
  - Legal meaning
  - Impact on the children
Divorce definition

- Dissolution (legally) of the “marital bond”
- The spouses separate and legally are no longer married to each other, i.e. the members of the couple
- Essentially the parents do not divorce from their children
Divorce definition

- A divorce means the failure of the “original family” as a viable entity
- For many children it means the “death of the family” as they knew it
- Separation and divorce are often the end result of a process of marital dysfunction, discord, micommunication, etc. that has been developing for some time
Pathways to divorce

- What lead the members of the couple to get married?
- Did they have a “happy period” in their marriage?
- What went wrong in the marriage?
- Several possible scenarios
Pathways to divorce

- Conflict, intense emotions, anger between the couple (even to domestic violence)
- High distance, poor communication, little in common, divergent opinions between members of couple
- Lack of conflict, indifference, lack of love
- Infidelity, attachment to someone else.
Effects of divorce on children

- Each child reacts individually
- Each child has own style of reacting to things
- There are common themes depending on cognitive and emotional development of child
- Previous history in “coming to the divorce”
In infancy

- Little awareness of the nature of the situation
- Reaction to “loss” of a parent, or everyday contact with a parent
- Reactions to episodic contact with one of the parents
- Reactions to “visitation” regime
- Little awareness of time, schedules, and future events
In preschool age child

- Child has "egocentric’ and “magical” thinking
- Child thinks he causes events because of his emotions and thoughts
- Tendency to think the divorce/separation is “his or her fault”
- For not being good, for being naughty, for not doing things correctly, etc.
In preschool age child

- Often parents do not explain to young child what is happening
- No adequate explanation of why a parent left the house
- No explanation of what the separation means to the child
- Nor what is the role of the parents and the children in the divorce
In school age child

- Child’s cognitive development includes “moral realism”
- i.e. good and bad, fair and unfair, guilty and innocent
- Child tends to “blame one parent’ or seek “whose fault it was”
- Child tends to “take sides” in the separation
In school age child

- Child becomes angry at one parent and pities the other one
- Child is resentful and negativistic toward one of the parents, the guilty one
- Child is susceptible to blaming comments by one or the other parent
In adolescence

- Some children seem “too involved” in the divorce details
- While other teenagers become “too distant” and not involved in the situation
- The adolescent may try to become a caregiver and soothe one or both parents
- Child may not deal with own reactions as he is “too busy outside the home”
How to intervene?

- Preparation for divorce
- Dealing with the moment of separation
- Dealing with the after effects of separation
- Dealing with the effects of divorce on children
Interventions

- Preparation for separation/divorce
- Children can talk about their reactions to marital discord or disagreements.
- Deal with reaction to previous separations
- To marital conflict
- To emotional distance between parents
Moment of separation/announcement

- Better with less intense expressed emotion, such as anger or loss of control
- Both parents optimally discuss the situation with all the children
- Hopefully in a calm way
- Explain that adults fall in love and “fall out of love”
Moment of separation/divorce

- Explain divorce as spouses, does not mean divorce from children
- If possible, reassurance that both parents will stay involved
- Explain the notion of “two homes” vs. one home and “visit” the other parent
Immediate reactions. Children

- Children are often surprised, confused, shocked, angry and sad
- Some children withdraw and suffer in silence
- Some will become angry, defiant, temper tantrums
- Others will “regress” to a previous level of functioning, acting younger
The “reality of divorce”

- A divorce is not an isolated, discrete, passing phenomenon
- It brings on long term consequences for the child and the family
- It marks the life of the child and the family throughout
Consequences

- Lower income for family, particularly if mother and children
- Often, mother has to go to work force
- Often, there is a move
- Often, change of school
- Possibilities of remarriages, and higher likelihood of a second divorce
“disparate parenting”

- Different rules in house of mother and father
- Different expectations, values, consequences, styles of dealing with problems
- There may be mutual disapproval and conflicting messages
Long term effects

- Children of divorce as adults more difficulties in relationships
- They themselves have higher rates of divorce
- The “Unexpected Legacy of Divorce”, Study of 131 children for 25 years (Wallerstein et al)
Legacy of divorce

- Narratives of lives of 131 children whose parents had divorced
- Follow up of 60 couples who underwent divorce
- Children now in late 20’s and early 40’s
- Fear that their own relationships will fail
- Fear of betrayal to find loving partner
- Some still struggle to overcome fear
Legacy…

- Comparison group of children
- Children of divorce view life differently
- Divorce is a long term crisis
- Life transforming experience, after divorce childhood is different
- Superficial impression of “overcoming divorce”
Legacy

- Why me?
- Rush into cohabitation or early marriage without much forethought
- Being alone raises fears
- Little hope they can do better than their parents, particularly if parents did not achieve a long lasting partnership with someone else
Legacy

- In early adulthood barren of memories of how adults can have a supportive lasting relationship
- A daughter may identify with her mother’s pain, particularly if the mother does not recover
- May have difficulty separating from mother, due to closeness
- Ruth: "Whither thou goest I will go."
Post divorce situation

- “good divorce” vs
- “bad divorce”
- Other characteristics of post separation or post divorce situation
- Commo post-divorce scenarios
Disneyland father

- Father sees the children only episodically
- Mother does most of the parenting, saying “no” to the children, do homework, etc.
- Father wants to give the children a good experience and good time.
- Fills the time with “fun activities, movies, restaurant, outings, etc. while mother cannot do that as often
- Children like to see father, mother feels undermined
Cut-off from relationships

One of the parents, often the father, suffers a lot with reunions and separations.

Children also suffer with separations and visitations.

Parent “withdraws” from children and makes visits more scarce.

Children feel unwanted, neglected, set aside.

Anger expressed toward the parent who stays.
Child as spy

- One of the parents wants to “Find out “ information about the other through the child
- Asks multiple questions and wants to know details about what the other parent does, who he sees, etc. etc
- Child transmits this information to please other parent, or to be faithful
Child as messenger

- One or both parents use the child as a transmitter of messages
- They do not talk directly “to avoid problems”
- Child is involved with issues of court, child support, disagreements
- Child “knows too much”
If only….

- One parent was not read for divorce
- Hopes the other parent will “come around”
- Shares with the child the hope that parent will return one day
- Difficulty in accepting the reality of the situation and mourning
Ambiguous message

- The parents have separated or divorce, yet they “stay close”
- The parents cohabitate intermittently and also say they have separated definitely
- Child is confused, hoping for a reconciliation any time
Competition between parents

- Parents want to “show the other parent” who is the best parent
- Competition about who is more successful, buys better things, is more educated, etc
- Parents try to outdo each other vis a vis the children
Trying to control the other parent

- Disputes continue after divorced over “what is best for the children”
- One parent tries to impose his/her values on the other
- Criticizes, judges, fights, alerts, warns, threatens legal action
- Intense relationship, through fighting
Issues of custody and “visitation”

- Parents disagree on where the child should spend time
- One feels he/she is that they are the “better parent”
- Contest time with child, vacations, holidays, etc.
- Often child feels torn
Parental continued disagreements

- On child rearing styles
- On movies, television programs, haircuts
- On exposure to other people,
- Schools that are acceptable
- What is good for the child
Parents post divorce

- If they disagreed during marriage
- Need to agree on some things after marriage
- Or agree to disagree
- Think about their needs and the emotional/material needs of their child
- Putting the child’s needs above their own personal hurt
Parents Post divorce

- Parents also experience mourning of the marriage and loss of the family
- Risk of “immediately” finding another partner
- “Partying” and becoming unavailable to the children
- Or becoming depressed and emotionally unavailable
Children post divorce: common scenarios

- Child hopes, even years later, that the parents will go back together
- Child says different things to each parent, such as “I wish I could live with you”
- Or “you are the better parent” to mother and father
- Not wanting to go to visitations
Children post-divorce

- Being “terrified” of the other parent
- Reporting negative events while the child spent time with the other parent
- Loyalty toward the biological parent vs the stepfather or stepmother
- Issues with blended families “mine, yours and ours” children
Common scenarios

- father, stepfather    mother-stepmother
- Differential treatment toward biological and step children
- “the truth about Cinderella”
- Child has intense loyalty conflicts
- A child is “programmed’ by the other parent not to like new family