

Parenthood: When's daddy coming home?

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Children are always affected when their parents break up. Robin Barker looks at some of the problems children may have and talks about how they can be minimised.

Although divorce rates in Australia have never again reached the high of 1976 (66,000) after the 1975 Family Law Act removed the fault-based grounds for parting couples, there has been a gentle but steady increase during the past 30 years. Just over half of all divorces involve children under 18 - and this figure does not include de facto couples with families.

Prior to the 1960s, when divorce was relatively uncommon, there was significant stigma. As well, securing a divorce involved proving fault: adultery, cruelty, attempt to murder, insanity, drunkenness and so on.

While divorce is still viewed negatively, it is also recognised as an apparently inevitable part of the reshaping of family life. Changing attitudes mean there is now a higher expectation of personal freedom and fulfilment. Adults today are much more inclined to take steps to escape from conflict and unsatisfactory marital relationships than those of previous generations. Increased mobility, growing acceptance of a greater variety of family structures and women's financial independence and presence in the workforce have also contributed to social changes that affect family life.

IS DIVORCE THE NORM?

It continues to be generally acknowledged that divorce is unfortunate, but because it's so common, there is a growing tendency to view it as more or less normal. And because research overall shows that the majority of children from divorced homes don't end up with serious problems, the negatives of divorce may not always be spelt out clearly. But divorce is rarely easy. While many families can overcome the negatives with time and patience, they should not be underestimated.

IMPACT ON ADULTS

- Usually a significant decline in income.
- Potentially an overload for one parent in relation to the household tasks and care of children (depending on how housework and child care were shared before the separation).
- Psychological upheaval - for example, intense emotional swings, deep-seated burning anger that won't go away, depression, anxiety, abnormal impulsive behaviour.

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- Physical symptoms, such as an increase in infections, accidents and allergies.
- A diminished ability to fulfil the parental role because of a preoccupation with him- or herself and all the associated problems that separation and divorce bring.
- Even if the old life was unsatisfactory, it is now a way of life that is gone and there is usually a great sense of loss for both adult and child.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

- Changes in lifestyle due to decline in the family income and adult time available for leisure and sporting activities. Sometimes, divorce involves moving home, changing schools, severing ties with friends and extended family.
- Great sense of grief caused by loss of a family member, the security and rhythm of daily life, and the everyday family interaction.
- Anxiety caused by fear of being abandoned or punished and fear that his or her actions caused the problems.
- Anger.
- Conflict between siblings.
- An increase in academic and social problems for many.

The negative stresses are most marked in the first two years after the divorce. For most families, these decline with time, as long as a stable and caring parent-child relationship is maintained.

HOW ARE CHILDREN AFFECTED?

Some professionals tend to be overly optimistic about the impact divorce has on children - sometimes to the extent of suggesting that children of families where divorce takes place have advantages over those from intact families. Other experts are pessimistic. It is generally agreed that:

- Some relationship break-ups are necessary to protect children from unhealthy environments and dangerously irresponsible behaviour. However, others involve parents who want to improve their life situations. Without wishing to trivialise the pain and guilt a parent may go through for years before making the break, the concerns of the child are sometimes secondary.
- While there is a good argument that divorce is a better alternative for children living in a home filled with violence, anger, hostility or aloofness, few children wish their parents to divorce and the majority are initially unhappy, anxious and resentful.
- Most children do not suffer enduring adverse effects, as long as they are not exposed continually to new family turmoil. Depending on the temperament of the child and the issues surrounding the divorce, a small number continue to have problems and some have a delayed reaction in adolescence or early adulthood.

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- The crucial element for children is not so much the divorce as the way it is handled. Co-operation between parents minimises the pain and protects children from it. Ongoing conflict, where the child is caught between two warring parents, has a greater negative impact than the actual divorce. There is an increasing recognition that the interests of the child, as opposed to those of the adult, must become the dominant focus of arrangements, post-divorce.

MANAGING THE BREAK-UP

Minimising conflict depends very much on the behaviour and attitudes of the adults. They can try to co-operate, or continue a drawn-out battle over kids and property, and live in constant bitterness.

The law can only go so far in determining suitable arrangements. The Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill 2005, still in draft form, is an attempt to make the system less adversarial and introduce shared responsibility, with the understanding that the interests of the child are paramount. Currently, children are often treated as the spoils of divorce, with most parents focusing on their own needs.

MINIMISING CONFLICT

- Seek counselling as early as possible. The sooner action is taken, the more likely major problems can be resolved.

- Counselling and mediation help couples reach practical agreements concerning living arrangements for the children, and financial and property arrangements. These services are available from community organisations (The Family Court) and private mediators. The new Family Law Amendment Bill is making provision for 65 Family Relationship Centres, which will hopefully make access to counselling and mediation much simpler.

- If an agreement is reached outside court, this can be made legally binding by registering a Parenting Plan.

AVOIDING A BREAK-UP

Sometimes, the conflict between couples is of a low level (we're not talking about abusive relationships here) and the advantages to themselves and their children in trying to resolve their differences may be greater than going through divorce. After all, the breakdown rate for second and subsequent marriages is as high, if not higher, than first marriages.

Unfortunately, the option of staying put and sorting things out is often not considered. However, the upheaval caused to everyone's lives can sometimes be avoided by having marriage counselling that includes looking at the issues from the child's point of view.

- Robin Barker is the author of *Baby Love*, \$35, and *The Mighty Toddler*, \$35, both published by Pan Macmillan.

EASING YOUR CHILDREN'S PAIN

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- IF IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to maintain a co-operative, consensual relationship with each other, try for a non-interfering relationship, where both partners, in front of the children at least, are positive about each other and avoid criticism. Children must always be allowed to love both their parents.
- COMMUNICATE honestly and clearly about what is going on. As often as possible, let children know about any changes well before they happen.
- TELL THE TRUTH insofar as it affects your children's day-to-day lives. A calm explanation is best - avoid inappropriate details and negative comments about the other partner. Children need to know that both their parents love them and will (if possible) never leave them.
- TRY AS MUCH as possible to be available to your children. This is difficult when you are distraught and burdened, but they need the reassurance of their daily routine and adult attention to their messages of distress.
- BE TRUSTWORTHY and reliable about supporting your children, spending as much time as you can with them, attending school, sporting and other functions, and maintaining financial support.

TRAUMA AND THE UNDER-THREES

It is easy to think, or even hope, that toddlers don't know what is going on, particularly before they can express themselves. However, they are able to form ideas long before they can speak, so it is a mistake to believe that they are unable to understand at least some of what is happening around them.

Toddlers rely on play, facial expressions, body language and single words to get their messages across, and a parent needs to be responsive to the tiniest of clues. Assuming that the separation won't affect them in the same way it will affect older children means toddler anxieties may go underground. Eventually, they are likely to surface as one or more of a host of behavioural problems that are, in fact, cries for help. Examples include: nightmares; regression in areas such as potty training, sleeping and eating; temper tantrums; and extreme separation anxiety.

So it is important to follow the same strategies as outlined above for toddlers, as well, bearing in mind their developmental capabilities.