



Relationships *The Adlerian Team*

Helping Children through the Process of Separation and Divorce

By Ed Murray

As parents, we hope to protect our children as much as possible. In addition to watching out for their safety, we also teach them how to keep themselves safe by not playing with objects such as matches or cleaning solvents or by playing near traffic. But one thing we cannot protect our children from indefinitely is the experience of loss.

Loss is the pain we experience when we lose someone or something that we cherish. It could involve the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, favourite aunt or uncle, or even a dearly loved pet. These are the painful experiences that we all must face at some point in our lives and unfortunately there is no quick way to get over grieving. Grieving is a process that is worked through over time, and it often takes months or years. But the grieving process *can* also eventually move us forward to a feeling of acceptance allowing us to integrate the loss into our lives, enabling us to live and love again with joy and optimism.

Children's Experience of Loss

When children experience loss, their grieving process is often done in instalments. Children may show signs of intense grief for a short period of time and then suddenly, they may be able to go off and play without mentioning the loss for a few days or weeks. Then, seemingly out of blue, they may again show signs of intense sadness and grief. It is also common for children, and particularly for teenagers, to express their sadness and grief as anger and irritability, which often gets directed at those closest to them.

When divorce happens in a family, children can experience a tremendous sense of loss, which may feel just as painful as the death of a loved one. When parents divorce, children are faced with the unknown: suddenly, the kind of family they lived within may change dramatically, and they can feel a tremendous amount of fear, sadness and confusion.

Caught in the Middle

Parents going through a divorce are also under an enormous amount of stress and they too, are not only grieving, but also may be experiencing intense anger at each other for what each believes to be completely justifiable reasons. If children are drawn into these conflicts, they can end up becoming innocent bystanders caught in the parental crossfire. When children are exposed to these parental conflicts, in addition to feeling a huge sense of loss, they find themselves faced with the confusion and fear of what is going to happen next.

Children have not yet developed emotionally to the point where they can understand these kinds of conflicts between their parents and, at the same time, remain neutral and emotionally balanced. So in spite of how parents may feel about each other at this time, their children still need their emotional support and assurance more than ever throughout this difficult transition.

Therefore, when parents talk to their children about the divorce they must ask themselves: "*Whose needs are really being met by what I am going to say?*" The answer of course, is that the needs of the children must come first. Children need to feel safe and secure. Feeling safe and secure is vital to their emotional health.

Sometimes "The Truth" Can Be Used To Harm

Even though there may be a perceived injustice that has occurred in the marriage, for the sake of children's emotional health, parents should not burden them with the *details* of the marriage breakdown. There are times when "*the truth*" can be used as a weapon for harm. Therefore, parents may need to resist the impulse to vent their frustrations about each other, or use their children as a source of emotional support, or insist that their children choose sides by presenting "*evidence*" and "*building a case*" against the other parent. This only serves to divide and poison relationships within the family and may result in the grieving process being even more difficult for children that it has to be.

Helping children integrate this enormous change in their lives is the responsibility of both parents. Because children have a relationship with each of their parents, it is important that both of these relationships continue to be sustained and nurtured despite the conflict that is occurring between their parents. This means that each parent must honour and respect the emotional boundary that their children have with the other parent.

Some Do's

- Do.....remind children that they are loved and that they will be taken care of.
- Do...remind children that they still have both parents in their lives.
- Do...support and encourage children by letting them know that life will get better.

Some Don'ts

- Don't...vent to children about the other parent.
- Don't...use children as a source of emotional support.
- Don't...insist that children choose sides.

Counselling as a Resource for Families Experiencing a Separation/Divorce

Parents can seek the help of a family counsellor to help support and guide them through this complex transition in their lives. In spite of how difficult separation and divorce can be for families, the emotional anguish will not last forever. Although divorce is a loss for the family, it can eventually be accepted as a new beginning for everyone involved.

Each child has his or her own relationship with each parent and that relationship will continue into the future. After separation and divorce, it is the responsibility of each parent to further nurture and develop their relationship with their children, while respecting the relationship their children has with their former spouse. Although this may be a challenge, the benefits of this new kind of cooperation will be apparent in their children's future emotional health.