

CHILDREN'S DIFFICULTY WITH DIVORCE

Affairs of the Heart

It is the nature of love and loyalty in the human heart that makes divorce a painful problem for children. The magnitude of the problem is in direct proportion to the degree of conflict between the parents. Actually, the same is true in married families. The more parents are friendly, cooperative, peaceful and respectful toward each other, the more secure, settled and untroubled are the children. The more the atmosphere between the parents is tense, unfriendly, hostile, or negative, the more emotional and psychological difficulty is experienced by the children. The reason for this lies in the human heart—it is inherently painful, confusing, and stressful to love two people who are at serious odds with each other.

As hard as this is for adults, it is far more difficult for children, who by nature are programmed to love, to bond with, to be loyal to, and to fit with their parents. Children's minds and hearts attempt to deal with loyalty conflicts and a negative atmosphere between their parents in many ways, depending on their stage of development. The many different problems and reactions shown by children in conflicted divorces seem to boil down to three general categories. Very young children (infants through age 4) have **transfer reactions**. The minds and hearts of preadolescent children (5 to 10 or 11) tend to cope by **switching**. The rapidly developing minds of young adolescent children (10 or 11 to 14 or 15) all too often resort to **splitting**. These psychological processes or reactions are discussed in some of the following sections: **transfer reactions** in Tommy's Story; **switching** in Mary's Story; and **splitting** in the essay about parental alienation and the refusal of access.

However, before reading these sections, it would be good to get a feel for what children's minds and hearts are up against. This is very easy to do by simply multiplying by ten. I will present two situations that a parent might experience. The reader only has to imagine what a parent would experience in these situations and then multiply by ten. This will give an approximation of what children experience in a conflicted divorce.

First, imagine that one day the Ruler of the Realm comes to your door to have an important talk with you. By the Ruler's tone and look, you know this probably isn't going to be good. Your mind quickly reviews your recent conduct. As far as you can remember, you have been keeping all the laws, even the speed limits. True, you have been a little upset about government squabbling lately, but you haven't made any serious noises. In fact, the Realm has seemed shaky and you've been trying to be extra good.

The Ruler proceeds to the family room, sits down, and gets right to the point. “I have decided that both of your children can no longer live in the same house,” the Ruler announces. “You must choose one of your children to remain with you, and the other will be taken away to live elsewhere.” Your stomach sinks, your mind is totally confused, you sense your world crumbling. “But I can’t possibly choose between my children,” you plead, “I love them both.” “It is not that hard,” the Ruler replies, with an air of irritation, “Just decide which one you love the most, or which one you enjoy the most, or which one you prefer.” “But I love and prefer and enjoy both my children, though in different ways and for different reasons,” you protest. “I’m sorry,” says the Ruler, “But you cannot keep both of your children. One of them has to go. So you had better figure it out before next week, when I will return to get your decision.”

Can you imagine what you would go through during the following week? Multiply by ten, and you will get some appreciation of what children experience when they feel they have to choose between their parents, or send one parent off. Can you imagine what you would experience if and when you did make the choice? Multiply by ten.

Second, imagine your two children coming to hate each other. They fight constantly. Sometimes they are violent. No matter what you do, you cannot make them get along. If you are kind or nice to one, the other is tense with you, says little to you, and starts to sink into depression. Each child constantly blames the other and tries to convince you the other is at fault. No matter what you do, their conflict gets worse, and they hate each other more and more. It starts to drive you crazy. They won’t allow you to be neutral. Each constantly tries to make you judge and condemn the other. Your stress keeps increasing. Out of desperation, you find yourself starting to see one of the children, the apparently stronger one, as more the instigator, more at fault. You hope that if you blame and condemn this child more, you will find some way to stop the conflict and hatred. Besides, this stronger child had been very close to you prior to the conflict and might be able to come around.

It doesn’t work: the weaker child becomes all the more hysterical and out of control, while the stronger child feels more and more wronged and outraged. You are about to crack. Everything has fallen apart. The family is not a family but a war.

Finally, just before cracking up, and after a particularly ugly fight, you decide that you can’t have both of the children. One has to go. It has to be the stronger one. He can, hopefully, endure it better, and the weaker one needs you. Immediately after making this decision and banishing the stronger child, the family is like heaven. All the stress is gone. Your appetite returns. You begin doing well at your job again. You have fun with your friends. You get along exceptionally well with your one remaining child. Family life feels better than it has for a long time. It convinces you that you made the right decision.

At first you feel, in quiet unguarded moments, some anguish or regret about your lost child. But each time this occurs you find yourself quickly remembering all the bad things he did. In fact, in no time you find yourself unable even to remember any good times at all. If anyone asks you about him, you take the opportunity to go over all the ways he was impossible and bad. You aren't even aware of it, but you don't dare remember the good times and the love that you once shared. These all got put away in a box, like the pictures. This is the only way you can preserve the family you have, and enjoy the one child you have left.

Can you imagine what is eventually going to happen to you? Multiply by ten and you will get a sense of the psychological danger awaiting a child who has turned against his/her stronger parent. Can you appreciate the consequences of having turned your back on a once loved child? Multiply by ten. When and how will you ever live with this, once the denial and forgetting fail you? Multiply by ten. And go watch the movie Sophie's Choice.

Fortunately, most divorces do not face children with serious loyalty choices, or with parental conflict so intense that the only solution is to eliminate (**split** off from) one parent. Many divorces, in fact, occur as the only way to put an end to serious marital conflict and unhappiness. This can be beneficial. Other than abuse, there seem to be two things that cause long-lasting emotional harm to children: **bad marriages** and **bad divorces**. Dr. Kneier works in both of these areas: helping couples create a better marriage, and helping divorced parents create a better divorced family.