

## The “Good Divorce” is a Necessity for Families with Children

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The United States has the highest rate of divorce in the industrialized world. It is estimated that 25% of the adults in this country between the ages of 18 and 44 are the products of divorced households. While some children exhibit no ill effects, studies have shown them to be at an increased risk of experiencing academic and social problems.<sup>1</sup> The risks continue in adolescence with “[parental divorce and its associated stressors [being] associated with increased probability of teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and adult mental health problems.”

Divorce is not publicly sanctioned in American and, the stigmatization related to its occurrence has waned over the years. Most people believe, however, that children, who share the experience of the ending of a marriage, will suffer some degree of psychological harm, developmental set back, or the loss of a meaning for relationship with one parent. In the past the focus has been on the “event”: the divorce. Recently researchers and theorists have advocated a change in our focus. Farlene, Wolchik & Karoly, 1988 reasoned that regardless despite the increased likelihood of maladjustment after a divorce, the majority of children raised in separate households adjusted well and did not exhibit problematic behaviors.

Divorce, like the unexpected death of a parent, the onset of a life threatening illness of a child, or the unsuspecting loss of the primary earners employment, creates a temporal family crisis that places an extraordinary amount of psychological, financial, and physical stress on each member of the family. Notwithstanding, it is how the family adapts to the crisis and transitions into the future that makes the difference in a well adjusted, or poorly adjusted child. How the family reorganizes, not the fact that an unpredicted life event required change with in its structure, will determine the emotional and economic “fate” of the children.<sup>2</sup> Parents who want to minimize the potential for a harmful transition from a nuclear to a binuclear family chooses in one for, or another, the course of the “Good” Divorce.<sup>3</sup>

A “Good” Divorce allows the intimate personal relationship between the parents to end, while sanctioning the children’s continuing intimacy with both parents and permitting them to maintain a relationship with both parents and their extended families. A “Bad” Divorce enmeshes the children in marital-related conflicts during the transition, undermines the children’s relationship with the other parent and his or her extended family, and places the children in an impoverished or uncertain financial situation at its legal conclusion.

The adversarial process of dissolving the marriage encourages legal and therapeutic professionals to take sides in the battle over the culturally esteemed derivatives of the relationship: the children and the assets. All too often the mother’s source of power in the conflict lies in her influence over the children and the father’s in his control over the assets. Parents today know that the adversarial process does not work. It costs too much financially and emotionally. Yet, they are seduced by their anger, led by their grief, inspired by their fear, and in need of a success in the face of their feelings of personal failure. Parents today need to be encouraged to realize it is a conscious, but unreasonable, choice to participate in the process of a “Bad” Divorce. The “Good” Divorce is the only logical choice once one realizes that it does, and will, minimize the detrimental effects of divorce. Parents who chose compromise for the sake of the children, and cooperation in the face of frustration, reap the rewards of a continuing, but separate household, family and children who weathered the inevitable storms of divorce.

The dissolution of a parents' relationship involves a long process of adaptation for children to extensive familial reorganization and environmental changes, while in the midst of their own personal development. They must reconstruct their social networks, redefine family relationships, and re-establish household takes in a “bi-nuclear” home. While addressing these external changes, they must also adapt

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<sup>1</sup> Hipke, K. N., Wolchik, S. A., Sandler, I. N., & Braver, S. L. (2002). Predictors of Children’s Intervention.

<sup>2</sup> Felner, R.D., Terre, L. & Rowlson, R. (1988). A Life-Transition framework for understanding dissolution and family reorganization. New York: Gardner Press, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Ahrons, C. (1994). The good divorce: Keeping your family together when your family comes apart. New York: Harper Perennial.

intrapsychically. They must acknowledge the reality of the separation, deal with their feelings of loss and rejection, acknowledge their anger, forgive their parents, accept the permanence of the divorce, and achieve realistic hope for future loving relationships.<sup>4</sup>

Parents who opt for the "Bad" Divorce adapt to the stressors created during the transition in maladaptive ways, such as conflict, substance abuse, isolation, or avoidance, creating a developmentally hostile environment for their children.<sup>5</sup> The research clearly establishes that the parents who choose the path of the "Good" Divorce have the opportunity to adapt positively to the transformation from a "nuclear" to a "binuclear" home and are more likely to have the financial support and subsequent security and stability, which generally can only be provided through a cooperative post-dissolution parenting arrangement.

Parents with the courage and insight to choose the positive alternative, or the "Good" Divorce, must change the way they "think" about divorce. One out of every two marriages is dissolved. Therefore, parental separation has become the norm, not an abnormal shameful event. A divorce, like a marriage, is not defined in a single day, but is a series of events: a conversion from the emotional, financial, and spiritual unity of a single household to equally, loving and financially secure binuclear households. The relationship between parent and child does not have to end, unless the unspoken, or spoken, family rules require the children to terminate the relationship with one to preserve the relationship with the other. Parents, who participate in the "Good" Divorce change their behavior towards the other spouse, and the traditional cultural rules that prohibit cooperative and positive interaction between former lovers.

A divorce can simply redefine the context in which a family lives, or it can be an excuse for the termination of the intimate psychological and supportive connections between its members. If keeping the family a "family" for the sake of the children is the number one parental priority, all out "war" is not an option because it is certain to hinder, or destroy, the children's ability to maintain a relationship with both parents.

Parents, who chose the path of the "Good" Divorce, manage their own divorce, and make their own decisions after appropriate advice and counsel. They realize that they are the only true experts on what is best for their family. They seek guidance and direction in order to make informed decisions without relinquishing their control over the process or their responsibility for the actions of their legal representatives and family agents.

In order to minimize the negative affects on their children, astute and conscientious parents<sup>6</sup>

- Slow down the process to allow their children to adjust to the changes
- Accept their children's needs and rights to have relationships with both parents
- Cooperate with their "ex," if only for the sake of the children
- Establish a limited parenting partnership with clear rules which encourage a positive vision of a new "bi-nuclear" family
- Permit the expansion of their children's family to include non-biological kin.
- Find new ways of relating independently with their children

In addition, parents must integrate their past relationship, and subsequent divorce, into their own lives in a healthy way. They need to<sup>7</sup>

- Remember the good parts of the relationship within the context of the family before the divorce and share those memories with their children
- Face their losses without drowning in the pain
- Forgive themselves and their ex
- Let go of their anger

Last, but not least, parents who choose the course of the "Good" Divorce, must select a process for ending the relationship which is conducive to these goals. The adversarial process is guaranteed not to promote the cooperation, communication, and compliant behaviors that are necessary for parents to co-parent after they cease to be spouses. The adversarial process increases stressors for children because it

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<sup>4</sup> Ahrons, supra.

<sup>5</sup> Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, supra.

<sup>6</sup> Ahrons, supra.

<sup>7</sup> Ahrons, supra.

often enhances the level of parental conflict and raises uncertainties about future contact with both parents. Mediation is the best legal option for terminating the marriage, while keeping the process focused on the needs of the children.

Emery, Laumann-Billings, Walron, Sbarra, and Dillon (2001) conducted a study on the relationship between parental conflict and alternative methods of dispute resolution. The results of their study confirmed that most parents reached an agreement through mediation (89%), drastically reducing the litigation, and that the agreements were more likely to provide for joint legal custody, while maintaining the tradition of the mother as the primary parent. Those who mediated their agreements tended to report less parental conflict and reported more child-related discussions with the nonresidential parent. The process tends to open the door to "child-centered" communication and change.

The results did suggest a correlation between mediation and enhanced post-divorce psychological adjustment of the children. Non-residential parents who mediated reported significantly more involvement with their children, tended to have more telephone contact, visit more frequently, and be more involved in making decisions involving their children. Despite the fact that lessened parental conflict was not associated with the method of dispute resolution, this study offers strong proof that mediation results in the non-primary residential parents having a higher level of contact and involvement with their children after divorce.

The "Good" Divorce is the only viable option for parents who do not want to waste their financial resources and emotional energy in an attempt to gain assets, in a system requiring their depletion to participate, or the hearts of their children when they can only be won through a quiet, consistent, and sharing love. The Good divorce is the logical and compassionate choice for loving parents who face the unexpected life transition of ending a marriage.