

Through the Eyes of Children Healing Stories about Divorce

By Janet R. Johnston, Karen Breunig,
Carla Garrity, and Mitchell A. Baris

Children typically suffer pain, confusion, and insecurity when their parents separate. They are hurt by outbursts of anger, bitterness, a lack of respect, an inability to communicate, and the overt hostility that can repeatedly flare up between battling parents. Family members are profoundly concerned about how best to respond to children's pain, how to communicate with them, and how to help heal their emotional hurt. We have found that simple stories can help children understand and cope with parental separation and the fallout from their parents' conflict.

Anyone who cares about the child can construct stories tailored to each child's individual needs and fears. The storyteller should understand the family experience from the child's point of view and attempt to address and experience the child's deepest concerns.

Children very much want to believe that their parents once loved each other and that they were born out of love and hope and good expectations for a happy family. Many children whose parents have never lived together or separated soon after they were born have no memory of the good times when their parents loved and enjoyed each other. If they are ever able to accept the finality of their parent's divorce, children need to understand, in an age-appropriate way, why the marriage broke up. Children need a clear explanation of what happened and why. Children struggle with the puzzle of their parents' conflicting claims and counterclaims.

Ordinarily, children use their parents as a social reference for what is safe and trustworthy. Children in difficult divorce situations, however, face the profound dilemma of making sense out of vastly contradictory views communicated by the hostility, fear, and distrust between their parents. Children are left to figure out for themselves who is safe, who is dangerous, and who can be trusted.

Second, because of the often profound emotional neediness of their distressed parents, these children become urgently concerned about the emotional and physical well-being of a parent. These children often are highly attuned to the task of taking care of a parent's feelings, and they tend to constrict or hide their own needs and feelings.

Third, because they often are the centerpiece of their parents' arguments, to varying degrees these children feel responsible for the disputes, yet most feel helpless to control, or stop the conflict.

Family Advocate Vol. 21, No. 1 American Bar Association