

## **Marital Conflict or Divorce – Which is Worse for Children?**

**By Meredith Pope, LPC**

Divorce is quite common in today's society, with estimates that 1 in 3 marriages will disrupt within 10 years. For children of parents who are separating or divorcing, we know this is an incredibly difficult time for them. A conflictual break-up threatens their well-being and is considered a major life stressor. Kids can become sad, withdrawn, anxious, or misbehaving without adequate help and support. Dr. Heloisa Portela at Awakenings says, "Divorce is obviously traumatic for children. With different forms of child-centered therapy, children can learn how to deal with the intense feelings."

Family disruption by divorce is extremely traumatic but it is at least a defined event. If the parents cannot resolve their differences, children in a high-conflict marriage can truly be worse off because the tension is on-going. From a disagreement to a yelling match, and miserably sometimes even aggressive behavior between parents, children of all ages are keenly aware that something is not right at home. With verbal abuse and name-calling, much less physical abuse, a child within hearing distance can actually be emotionally abused by the shattering knowledge that two people she loves and needs are hurting each other. Even if the child is not the target of severe family disruption, unceasing tension and lack of respect between her parents leaves an indelible scar and hurts her capacity for intimacy. When too much family energy is absorbed in conflict, her parents often lack time and patience for her needs and concerns. The constant guilt that parents feel leaves them with fewer resources to make the difficult changes for happiness.

When making the decision to stay or leave, parents should ask themselves if they would want their children to grow up and imitate the behavior of the aggressive parent or even marry a person like the aggressive parent. While we are deeply committed to marriage at Awakenings, sometimes the best course of action for the child is for the parents to separate.

Rather than avoiding the subject or the child, it is best to have an active strategy to help your kids. Ask your children what they are thinking and feeling. Answer their questions. If you think they are sad, confused, or angry about the situation at home or elsewhere, tell them that you sense they are sad, confused, angry, etc. and see where the conversation leads. An excellent resource on the subject is *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Faber and Mazlish (1980).

Demonstrating affection, acceptance, consistent discipline, and affirmation to children when a parent is not in the best place can be very challenging indeed! Therapists can support a parent when their partner is not available, not doing their part, or actively hurting the kids by their behavior. Children can be taught to deal with their social lives, and future relationships to become free of their parent's problems.

If treatment of the family unit is possible or desirable, a strong therapist can hold boundaries while the members explore patterns and new ways of relating which stop the terrible cycle of destruction forever. Listening to the concerns of all family members without judgment, a therapist can finally resolve disagreements over sex, finances, parenting, and extended family. A conflicted couple seeking help to change their relationship is the single most powerful gift they can give toward raising children with high self-esteem and deep relational security.