



Divorce Impacts the Classroom

The Educator's Role

Educators prepare daily for academic instruction but they can not prepare, nor anticipate, what each child may bring inside the classroom. "Children come to school to learn, but they are truly individual people and they come with whatever they come with; we can't expect them to turn off what is going on with them" (divorce360, 2009). Excitement at home typically spills over into the classroom whether it's acquiring a new pet or looking forward to a family event. Likewise, anxiety and depression from a family separation or divorce can affect behavioral and academic performance. Kids who worry "about their parents' regular conflicts tend to have more difficulties in school"

(KidsHealth, 2009).

The U.S. Census bureau has estimated that over 50 percent of all American children "will live in single-parent homes sometime during their first 18 years, mostly as a result of separation or divorce" (ERIC Digests, 2009). Reactions to lifestyle changes impact the classroom and the individuals working with children.

By "leaning on teachers and counselors in the school system, we ensure that everyone involved with the student watches for any signs of emotional difficulty as a response" advises Cheli Cerra, M.Ed. (divorce360, 2009).

"Beyond observing a student's behavior, teachers



The big thing is not making divorce the secret kids feel they can't talk about.
(divorce360, 2009)

can also help provide a stable, nurturing environment for the student which is especially important when the divorce is not amicable"

(divorce360, 2009). School is a familiar setting of continuity and routine when everything outside of school is not (ERIC Digests, 2009). Educators are key leaders in the supportive role students need during times of turmoil and uncertainty.

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Special points of interest:

- ♦ *When a family falls apart.*
- ♦ *Keeping a distance from divorce battles.*
- ♦ *When students blame themselves.*
- ♦ *Counseling matters!*
- ♦ *What can the school counselor do?*
- ♦ *Focusing on the positive.*

Caught in the Middle?

Educators are often inadvertently made unwilling participants of a family's conflict but when helping students through tough times, such as divorce, it's important to not get caught in the middle (SPARC, 2009). The Separated Parenting Access & Resource Center has rec-

ommended the following guidelines for educators.

*Make no assumptions by listening to "one side of the story." "Educators should promote healthy involvement of any parent with a child" (SPARC, 2009).

*An educator is not responsible for parent negotiations.

*Continue to foster positive relationships between the student and both parents. "No educator should be denying contact between a child and either of the parents at school without a court order specifically stating so" (SPARC, 2009).

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The Student's Broken Dream

Educators, specifically teachers, realize that for students to learn, they must be comfortable in their learning environment. "Educators cannot correct the problems in their parents' marriages, but we can be aware of and sensitive to the emotional turmoil that engulfs students because of these problems and offer a caring, stable environment in a time of upheaval" (Yale,



"Children need a place in which they can work out what is happening in their lives." (Yale, 2009)

2009). Withdrawing from friends, a drop in academic performance and acting out may all be signs that a student's home environment is changing. "It is very difficult to act 'normal' when the very foundation of your life is being destroyed and you are not sure what is happening or why" (Yale, 2009). The ripple effect of separation, divorce, or the mere mention of it, can

spill over into the classroom as a student wonders how to explain the changes to others. "Explaining new living arrangements to friends, the possibility of moving to a new neighborhood, the trauma of losing old friends and starting new relationships, and the disappointment of a changed style of life" are issues that may be crowding the student's thoughts (Yale, 2009). Children often avoid asking questions for fear of adding to their parent's anxiety and in return are left in the dark adding to their uncertainties and stress.

Caught in the Middle? (continued)

*Continue to encourage parental involvement. "Studies show that parent involvement at school, especially with non-custodial parents, can have a positive impact on a child's performance at school" (SPARC, 2009).

*Become familiarized with the law, such as FERPA (The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act). "Absent a court order to the contrary, both parents have the right under Federal law to access their children's school records" (SPARC, 2009).

"Every year in the US, thousands of children and their families are devastated as a result of litigation in the family court system." (SPARC, 2009)

*Keep your personal emotions in check and follow only court directives. "If a parent is insistent about keeping the other parent away, this is all the more reason to be suspicious of their motives" (SPARC,

2009).

It's the law: "Section 99.4 of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) states that an educational agency or institution shall give full rights under the ACT to either parent unless the agency or institution has been provided with evidence that there is a court order, state statute, or legally binding document relating to such matters as divorce, separation, or custody, that specifically revokes these rights" (SPARC, 2009).

The Blame Game

A traumatic emotional experience such as divorce frequently involves the assignment of blame as students shift the cause or reason onto themselves. "If only they had been good, or better students, or if they had not been bad or failed at school, this terrible thing would not have happened; they believe strongly in their ability to cause things to happen" (Yale, 2009). Students must understand that a separa-

tion or divorce is between two adults and although affected, they are not to blame. "Getting children to understand that the issues in the divorce are between their parents and not their fault is a tough nut to crack" (Yale, 2009).

By discussing divorce



"Reinforce that the problems are between the parents and not the fault of the children." (Yale, 2009)

openly, students will discover they are not alone. Whether a student is at the beginning stage of divorce, in the middle, or has adjusted, students need to see that the process ends favorably. Dialogue also helps peers who are unsure as to what to say or

The Benefits of Counseling

When third to sixth graders were interviewed, 86% “thought that counselors could best help children whose parents are divorcing by encouraging the children to talk about their feelings. Approximately the same percentage reported that counselors could also help by providing children with books to read about divorce” (ERIC Digests,



“Schools can represent one stable force in the lives of children, helping them cope with the effects of divorce.”
(ERIC Digests, 2009)

2009). Individual counseling and group counseling are favorable options for students working through the upheaval of divorce. Group therapy is not only beneficial but also cost effective. A 1982 study reported that children in divorce group settings “led by school counselors with specific strategies to meet the needs of children were extremely successful” (ERIC Digests,

2009). Group therapy “helps children label and understand their feelings, realize that others are having similar feelings and experiences, understand the divorce process, learn new coping skills, and feel good about themselves and their parents” (ERIC Digests, 2009). Divorce offers a mutual catalyst for children “where they can learn to express and cope with their own feelings, the feelings of their parents, and develop communication skills for handling difficult situations” (ERIC Digests, 2009).

The School Counselor

The school counselor is a valuable resource for children during times of family separation and divorce. From supportive service to suggestions, the school counselor can be instrumental in positively impacting the student as well as the parents. “Counselors can also help to sensitize teachers to the transition a child is experiencing and to the implications of that transition” (ERIC Digests, 2009). If a student is missing homework assignments, for example, the teacher’s awareness will

benefit the student by allowing more time for completion or by offering alternate grade opportunities. “It’s also imperative that teachers are made aware of the student’s home situation for the more mundane issues, like emergency contact cards, dropping the student off at school, and picking the student up” (divorce360, 2009). By “interviewing the child about his or her response to the family situation and evaluating the child’s existing support systems,” the counselor will

“The best way to handle the upheaval a child faces after parents divorce is talking to them about what will happen, and developing a plan to react to it.”
(divorce360, 2009)

be able to make informed suggestions for all involved (ERIC Digests, 2009).

When I Was Born

Reminding a child that their birth was a joyous occasion “stimulates the sharing of common emotions” and reminds him that there was a day of celebration (Yale, 2009). Parents often tell their child that it was their *happiest day* or *the best day of their life*, reassuring the child in a divorce situation that she is still loved. The reaction of grandparents, siblings, relatives, or even adoption facilitators demonstrates the central

unity created by the child’s birth or arrival (Yale, 2009). It’s important for students to understand that even with a negative experience such as divorce, positive things happened in the past and that day will still be celebrated annually on their birthday. “Our distance from their



“Provide practical lessons and activities for students on issues and problems surrounding and created by divorce.”
(Yale, 2009)

families’ divorces can give us a different perspective that we can share with students, thus enabling them to look at the situation with more positive eyes” (Yale, 2009).

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Daphne Morris, M.Ed., met Trevor Romain in 1992 when he visited a school as a guest speaker. Impressed by Trevor's profound and meaningful impact on students, Daphne joined The Trevor Romain Company in 2006. A former elementary school principal, Daphne holds two Master's degrees in education.

March Q&A

Q: How can peers help their friends through divorce?

Dr. Robert Emery, professor of psychology and director of the Center for Children, has stated that while school can be challenging during times of family turmoil, it can also become a source of stability (divorce360, 2009). "If there are few divorced families in the school system, it is especially challenging because social embarrassment becomes an issue; however, if divorce is not uncommon, attending school can present a sense of normalcy" (divorce360, 2009). School counselors are a great resource as they have the means to create student peer groups. "Children at the beginning of the path find solace in not being alone in their new circumstances, while those who have moved along the path are encouraged by being able to help their peers" (divorce360, 2009). Educators have an opportunity to provide students with a sense of acceptance during a time when they might otherwise feel isolated and alone.



Resources:

Divorce360.com. "Parenting: Children Can Recover from Split if Teachers, Parents Work Together."

<http://divorce360.com/divorce-articles/child/general/back-to-school-after-divorce.aspx?artid=69> (accessed February, 2009).

ERIC Digests. "Helping Children Cope with Divorce: The School Counselor's Role."

<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-925/divorce.htm> (accessed February, 2009).

KidsHealth. "Parents' Fighting May Affect How Kids Do in School." <http://kidshealth.org/research/fighting.html> (accessed February, 2009).



Separated Parenting Access & Resource Center (SPARC). "Information for Educators Concerning Families of Separation or Divorce." <http://www.deltabravo.net/custody> (accessed February, 2009).

Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. "Divorce—The Broken Dream." <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1982/6/82.06.04.x.html> (accessed February, 2009).