



BY FRITZ ESKER

caught in the middle

While divorces are undeniably painful for adults, they are even more painful for children. After all, adults understand that in the real world, things don't always work out as planned. Sometimes marriages end. Children, however, lack this knowledge, making it all the harder for them to understand why mom and dad don't want to live together anymore. And the adults are often so caught up in the divorce and their own pain that they don't know how to address the pain of their children. So what can parents do to help their children cope with the divorce?

First and foremost, parents must convince children that the divorce is not the fault of the child. "Children tend to blame themselves no matter

what else is going on," said Dr. Jonathon Rynning, medical director of psychiatry at East Jefferson General Hospital. Parents should constantly reassure children that they are not to blame for the divorce. Rynning added, however, that sometimes children need to hear this from a third party (i.e. they may hear it so much from parents that they suspect the parents are just saying it to make them feel better).

A common mistake parents make (sometimes without even realizing it) is putting the children in the middle of the divorce. This can happen in a number of ways. One parent might badmouth the other parent to the child. If the parents refuse to speak to each other, they often rely on the child to serve as

a messenger. Sometimes they'll openly fight in front of the child. None of these behaviors are healthy. "Children need parents who come together around their needs," said Barbara LeBlanc, director of the parenting center at Children's Hospital. "Parents need to put aside their own animosities to meet the needs of their children." While this may seem difficult (especially in the early stages of divorce, when the wounds are still fresh), divorced parents need to accept the fact that, because of the children, they will be a part of each other's lives for a long time and should try to make the best of it.

On this note, if one parent has custody of the child, then that parent should not bully the other about the custody. LeBlanc stresses that it's vital for

the child to have safe contact/communication with the non-custodial parent. The child should be able to have private conversations with the non-custodial parent without the custodial parent looking over their shoulders.

It's also important to encourage children to express their emotions. They need to know that it's okay to be sad their parents have gotten divorced. "Let the children express their feelings," said Lisa Clark, manager of the employee assistance program at West Jefferson Medical Center. "Let them vent, let them cry. There's a lot of unknowns and it's scary for them."

Part of helping the children cope emotionally with the divorce is being honest with them about the reality of the situation. "They (children) think they might be able to do things to bring their parents back together," said Dr. Morris Burka, a clinical psychologist with Ochsner Health System.

Regarding the reality of the situation, adults also need to be aware that the children might have difficulty adjusting. Sometimes, adults assume that their children will be resilient and will get through it on their own. If the children are younger, it's even easier for parents to miss signs the child

is struggling because the children are unable to articulate their feelings. "Parents need to look for signs and signals that kids need extra help," said LeBlanc. "Young children often don't show depression by looking sad."

So what are the warning signs that children might need the help of a counselor or psychologist? According to LeBlanc, parents should look for any changes in the child's routine. If a child who was not previously a behavioral problem at school starts getting into fights and being disruptive, that's a sign the child needs help. Changes in eating patterns and trouble sleeping are also warning signs.

Eventually, many divorced parents will begin dating again and this can pose challenges for children as well. In this regard, it's a good idea for the parent to introduce his/her new companion slowly. "Keep your sexuality discreet and at a distance," said LeBlanc. And if the new relationship becomes serious to the point that a new marriage might result, be patient. "Don't expect it to be one big happy family immediately."

While it is important to focus on the children, parents need to make sure they're taking care of themselves so they can take care of their

children. LeBlanc uses the analogy of the safety demonstration on airplane. Flight attendants say that, if cabin pressure is lost, adults should put their oxygen masks on first to ensure that they'll be able to help children put their masks on. Similarly, adults going through a divorce need to take care of themselves (eat right, get exercise, get counseling if needed) so they'll be the best parents they can possibly be.

Finally, there is a light at the end of the tunnel in that children can take away positive life lessons from a divorce. According to LeBlanc, children can learn lessons about problem solving and healthy relationships, as well as the important lesson that "you don't have to stay in a miserable, unhappy situation."

When parents are going through so much on their own during a divorce, it can be easy to lose track of children's needs. But, parents must pay close attention to their children. If help is needed, parents should check out social work departments at local hospitals, ask the child's school for a referral, or contact charitable organizations like the United Way. **HFM**