

Front & Centre Ask A School Psychologist: Experiencing Loss

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Part 2 of 3 - Loss of A Nuclear Family Unit

Ask A School Psychologist

My Child Has Experienced A Significant Loss, How Do I Help Them Cope ? Hear?

Experiencing loss is an unfortunate and difficult part of life; consequently, it is an experience that parents want to protect their children from for as long as possible. Regrettably, loss will touch a child's life at some point or another, so parents need information to help their children process and heal. Loss comes in many forms: death of a loved one, divorce/family separation or moving to a new city/town. I am writing about this topic in three issues of Calgary's Child: Part 1. Loss of a Loved One (Jan/Feb 2014 Issue); Part 2. Loss of a Nuclear Family Unit; and Part 3. Loss of a Community.

In Canada, approximately 41 per cent of first marriages end in divorce (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2011) and it is unknown how many common-law relationships end in separation. As a result, it is no longer uncommon for children to experience the end of their parents' intimate relationship. How children experience this change is often dependent upon how their parents negotiate this typically painful and emotional process. How do parents influence their child's experience? Is it a loss of or a change to the nuclear family?

There Are A Few Key Components:

- be child-centered
- be mindful of your vocabulary
- develop a business relationship

Children are far more capable of dealing with their parents' divorce when they are not caught in between the two people they love the most.

Be Child -Centered

Stop - Put aside for a moment all the injustices your significant other has committed...

Think - What is best for the kids?

Many adults assume that this simple process would be easy - not so when emotions of disappointment, betrayal, abandonment, resentment, fear and intense anger are present. Typically, parents who are ending their relationship are doing so due to poignant differences, often forgetting what brought them together in the first place; concentrating on what tore them apart. This is the point at which the maturity of the parent(s) becomes the defining factor as to how their children will experience the separation and life going forward, justice Brownstone, a family court judge, defines parent maturity as 'loving your children more than you dislike your ex-partner.' Parent maturity

means putting the children's welfare first and making compromises. A mature parent does not try to punish their ex-partner through the children and makes sure that their children do not feel like they need to take sides. Genuinely mature parents know and believe that children have a right to a meaningful and caring relationship with both parents.

What is best for children is to maintain a healthy relationship with both parents. I have learned to admire the forgiveness children grant their parents - children want to be loved and cared for by both parents. Barring any safety concerns, I believe children have a right to their parental bonds.

Be Mindful Of Your Vocabulary

It is important to remember that the words that we use reinforce children's interpretation of any event. Some vocabulary that influences negative perceptions about a divorce or separation are 'broken home'; 'failed marriage'; 'victim of divorce' - think about what you are saying... Try: "Johnny has two homes"; "Sara is a blessing from my previous marriage"; or "My child has an extended family." Children whose parents live in two houses have two homes - regardless of how much time they spend there. Instead of saying, "The kids visit their father on the weekend" try, "They live with or stay with their father." When speaking of your ex-partner, refer to him/her as the child's mother or father. Using phrases that reinforce the parental bond instead of focusing on the loss of the nuclear family helps children focus on the relationships, maintaining a sense of family.

Develop A Business Relationship

Bitterness is toxic - rehashing mistakes and injustices will not change the past. Venting, as a part of the healing process, is therapeutic. Do it with your friends or a psychologist, not with your children or when they are present. Refrain from making snide remarks about your child's other parent - these remarks are the most damaging to your child. Focus on developing a business relationship; be polite and cordial when the children are present. If conversations escalate into arguments, use email for communication. When issues arise, wait for at least 24 hours before you send an inquiry for clarification. Do not make assumptions and escalate a simple problem. Keep your communication objective and matter of fact, editing emails for negative comments or subjective conclusions is helpful. Your children need you to take the high road and be a better person. Developing a business relationship takes time, and mistakes will be made along the way - your children deserve your efforts. A child of divorce once described to me her graduation dinner, both parents and a sibling were present; everyone acted like adults, the conversation was pleasant, there was laughter... best graduation gift ever!

Reading with a child and talking about divorce and separation can help them feel less isolated. Some children are more comfortable talking with a relative, teacher or psychologist about their feelings and perceptions.

Here are some books that may be helpful:

- Two Homes by Claire Masurel
- Mom 's House, Dad's House For Kids by Isolina Ricci
- My Family's Changing by Pat Thomas Essential reads for parents:

- Mom's House, Dad's House - Making Two Homes for Your Child by Isolina Ricci
- Tug o f War by Harvey Brownstone
- Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson, R. Psych., has been working in the education field for 25 years as a teacher, administrator and school psychologist. She has also taught university courses in the areas of special education, psychology and program effectiveness. Through Dr. Johnson's work in schools, she has developed a wealth of knowledge about learning, literacy and special education. Dr. Johnson can be contacted through her website, helpingchildren.ca.