



CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

How CY-FAIR PARENTS CAN HELP
CHILDREN *Cope With Life's Changes*

Written by Angela Bickford

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With half of all marriages ending in divorce, thousands of Cy-Fair area children will be impacted by divorce at some point in their lives. Experts agree it's one of the most defining moments of a child's life. If the divorce is handled incorrectly, a child may be harmed emotionally. But if both parents agree to put the child's needs first and provide adequate support systems, it's very possible for a child to 'thrive' not just 'survive' after a divorce.

Through a Child's Eyes

During this difficult period, parents are often so immersed in their own pain they may not notice the difficulties a child is going through. Many children believe that their parent's divorce is somehow their fault, worry that their parents will stop loving them, or that they will not get to see one parent anymore. Often children of divorcing parents may feel intense anger or will withdraw from their parents, closing the door to communication altogether. According to divorce experts, children need people who they can talk to where they can comfortably express their pain and negative emotions. This person can be a therapist, school counselor, relative, family friend, teacher, or pastor. Changes in your child's emotional responses, behavior, or school work are often indicators that your child is having trouble adjusting, but each child responds differently. "While children's behavior during times like this might look like outright defiance, many times it's masking more serious symptoms. Children need help through the situation," explain Roy Wooten, director of Shield-Bearer, a Cy-Fair area counseling center.

Somebody to Talk To

Wooten believes having a third-party get involved is important. "Having a third-party adult – not related to the children – is helpful as many times trust issues make communication difficult with parents and other family members." He stresses to parents that, "Increased acting out behaviors are common during any time of stress. Each age group – each child – has a different way of reacting. Any time children have substantial changes in their behavior patterns, routines, sleep and eating patterns, it's a good idea to engage a professional." Shield-Bearer assists those going through divorce with a supportive professional and a safe place to identify and deal with strong emotions like anger, depression, guilt, and grief. "Our focus is on helping the individual move through the different stages of the process while building personal strength," explains Wooten. "We also provide counseling to help parents in their communication to children regarding divorce."

Working Together as Parents

For many newly separated couples, one of the biggest challenges is finding a way to successfully parent the child as two separate beings in two households. For Christina Nansteel, a single mom of two who has been divorced for a few years now, making it work for her children's sake was the only way. "My main focus was on them and how they felt. We already knew how we felt. We struggled with how to help the kids – consistency was very important to their happiness." Nansteel and her ex made it a point to be open with their children. They stayed amicable through the divorce and the children showed positive responses because of their parent's ability to work together. "Some people can't overlook the anger, but it comes down to being an adult. We just reminded ourselves, 'This is an adult decision with adult consequences – now we need to focus on the kids.'" Part of Nansteel's

determination comes from being a child of divorce herself. "I knew I didn't want my children to go through that," she recalls of the bad time she had with it as a child. "Children are not leverage – it hurts the children more than the parents." Nansteel and her ex made sure that they were open with their children. "Even though they were young, they still knew. We sat them down and asked them how they felt and made sure they knew that mommy and daddy weren't mad at them." Wooten agrees with Christina's strategies, "It's best not to talk negatively about each other in front of the children. Divorce should not interfere with the children's needs being met."

Finding Hope and Healing

Divorce doesn't have to be the end of the road—it can be a new beginning. It isn't easy for parents or children, and often it's not what anyone would have chosen, but there are healthy ways to cope. Keeping a sense of normality helps everyone involved. It helps the family heal faster and makes it easier to maintain an everyday life. Christina's kids still see both of their parents. Counselor Cheryl Long believes that while there are common themes in all divorces, many can use guidance tailored to their unique situation and will benefit from becoming knowledgeable about relevant community resources. Long's sentiment: "After all, maybe it 'takes a village' to get through a divorce, too." **CFM**

ANGELA BICKFORD is the Editor of Cy-Fair Magazine and a child of divorce.

Photos by Deb Colson



Roy Wooten, Director of Shield Bearers, suggests that kids talk openly with someone during a divorce

Christina made sure to not use her children as leverage against her ex-husband during the divorce



Photos by Deb Colson

Christina and her ex-husband kept the lines of communication open with their children during their divorce

“This is an adult decision with adult consequences – now we need to focus on the kids.”

- Christina Nansteel

Tips for Divorcing Families

- If possible, have both parents present when telling children about the divorce.
- Tell your children that the divorce is not their fault and that you still love them.
- Give details regarding how life will change, but try to minimize the changes in your children's life as much as possible.
- Inform school and teachers about changes in the family, so that your children have a variety of support.
- Listen to your children and calm their fears by honest communication.
- Role model appropriate ways to deal with feelings, including supporting your child's relationship with their other parent.
- Do continue to discipline your children. Consistency is very important during this time.
- Find a supportive professional or join a support group.
- Focus on what is best for the children.
- Don't badmouth, judge, or criticize your child's other parent, and don't retaliate if the other parent is engaging in this behavior.
- Don't expose children to too many details of the divorce.
- Remember that children are not messengers or spies.
- Refrain from having the children be responsible for making adult decisions.
- Your child shouldn't become your best friend or confidant.
- Skip placing blame if the child asks why the divorce happened so that they do not feel that they have to judge or take sides.
- Don't withhold visitation or fail to pay child support.

From *divorceandchildren.com* & Roy Wooten on how to help your child cope

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