

Summer and Families with Divorce

Children of Divorce and the Summer

As the days get longer with much more time to play outside, many children can't wait until the end of school. We often hear children counting down the number of days left of school. Summer is coming, but for children of divorce, vacation may not be all fun and games. Their daily routines, contacts with extended families, friends and others will be different. This will present both opportunities and new stresses.

An experienced Hershey Park *Great Bear* rider can tell you that life is like a trip on a rollercoaster. A child of divorce understands this metaphor. When parents separate, the child's life takes on a number of ups and downs and the child's fear of change is evidenced in statements such as "things will never be the same." While riding the roller coaster of separation or divorce, another fear a child may experience is coping with parental tension. If parents try to turn the child against the other spouse, this creates a very difficult situation for that child. The impact of separation and divorce does not stop with the ending of school, but may be heightened with the changes of routine during the summer.

With the end of school just around the corner and changes in visitation schedules ahead, summer presents the child and parents with special challenges for coping with separation or divorce. Vacation time offers an opportunity for the non-residential parent to spend time with the child. Vacations also provide a great chance to get to know your child on a deeper level. It is very important for non-residential parents to know that their child being in their home does translate into quality time. While vacations do involve getting to know step parents or step siblings, this is not the most important task. Gary Neuman (1998) states in *Helping Kids Cope with Divorce*. "The main point of any visitation is to spend time with the parent and other family members the child feels comfortable with. The unfortunate truth is that many non residential parents' schedules do not allow for large blocks of free time".

It is important for both parents to talk with the child before any change in living arrangements for the summer occurs. When making plans with the child for the summer, parents should be honest about their feelings about the change in living arrangements as well as to clearly communicate their plans for the summer with them.

With vacation time being no exception, studies show that the child experiences the greatest impact of divorce within two to three years of its occurrence; however research also indicates that the child may be greatly affected by divorce throughout their youth.

With the challenges of summer, this time also offers an opportunity to provide continuity in parenting, which, with help, ensures a child's successful coping with the separation or divorce of his or her parents. In longitudinal research of adults who experienced separation or divorce twenty years ago, Constance Ahrens, (2006) states in *Family Ties After Divorce: Long Term Implications for Children*, "It is widely accepted that ongoing, serious conflict between parents has negative consequences for children regardless of whether their parents are married or divorced. Children whose parents were cooperative reported better relationships with their parents, grandparents, step parents, and siblings. Children report a desire to have better relationships with both parents. Research indicates that they don't want their parents to be friends but for them to be cordial and not badmouth each other."

When they reflected on how their parent's relationship affected them throughout the years, adult children of divorce noted that the state of the parental relationship directly affected the comfort within their living arrangements and their ability to transition back and forth between homes. As a group, they were far less concerned about the number of specific days per week or month they spent living with one parent or the other than they were about how their parent's relationship

infused the emotional climate surrounding their transitions between households.

The child of divorced parents experiences a wide variety of emotions and behaviors. Some feel responsible for the divorce. Others feel abandoned. Some turn their pain inward and withdraw and others turn their anger outward and misbehave. Some show physical symptoms. Others try to be "the perfect child" in order to save the marriage.

The elementary school child often feels deceived and feels an acute loss for the one parent, who moved away. Often, he or she will hope that their parents will "get back together," which is a theme we often hear in therapy. Along with this wish, the elementary school child may become depressed, show changes in eating and sleeping patterns, lack of interest in life, poor concentration, crying, irritability, and withdrawal. Sometimes he or she will feel rejected by the absent parent, but may worry about their parent's future well being, as well as their own. He or she may also become angry at both parents about the divorce as evidenced by the statement, "Why do you have to get divorced and ruin my life?"

Preteens and adolescents often understand, but have a great deal of difficulty in accepting their parents separation or divorce. They often become angry and feel betrayed or rejected by one or both of their parents. They may get on their "high horse" and become moralistic, critical, and may judge their parents decision to divorce harshly. Preteens and adolescents may become extremely embarrassed or disturbed by any change in their parents sexual behavior. They may also become more intense in risk taking and rebellion that is normal for this age – shoplifting, using drugs, becoming sexually active, skipping school, etc. They may become depressed or withdrawn and threaten suicide. Sometimes teens will behave much better hoping that if their behavior improves they can save their parents' marriage. Developmentally, adolescence is a time of developing autonomy and this process may be disrupted by their parents' separation or divorce.

In coping with the separation or divorce of their parents, the child needs to know and experience their parents' love for them as evidenced by their frequent contact with them. These feelings may become complicated by being afraid to separate from one parent or feel a strong need to align with one parent.

Studies indicate that the child who has counseling have a better chance of appropriately dealing with their parents' separation or divorce. He or she also have fewer symptoms in social or academic functioning. A child or teen may need professional help when their psychological or behavioral symptoms or behavioral move from normal behavior to sudden shifts in feelings, moods, and behaviors. The identifiable changes in the child's behavior might include these symptoms: depressed mood, tearfulness, lack of concentration or motivation, change in sleep habits, change in eating habits, poor attitude, increased irritability, excessive guilt, poor self-esteem, poor school performance, not completing homework, poor school grades, fighting with peers or authority, recurrent thoughts or conversations about death.

If a child is manifesting three or more of these symptoms, a parent should consider seeking counseling or professional help. Early intervention and help can make this difficult transition period easier and shorter. For a child or teen of divorce, it is critical that parents have an understanding of their child's experience to ensure a happy and healthy summer.

Children of Divorce's Bill of Rights

- Recognize that we love and need both parents
- Don't turn us into messengers. Mom and Dad should talk to each other directly.
- Don't say bad things about the other parent.
- Don't grill us about what is going on at our other parent's home.
- Don't ask us to take sides.
- Don't make us feel like we're being disloyal to you if we enjoy being with the other parent.
- If you have something angry to say to our other parent, don't say it around us.

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- Don't purposely forget clothing or gear when we go to our other parent's place.

Submitted by John Sivley LCSW, CAC

Co-parenting in the Summer

Divorced parents don't corner the market on having problems keeping their children safe and cared for in the summer while trying to make a living. Summer care for children and adolescents entails careful planning, intricate coordination and self-sacrifice for all parents. However, divorced parents do face added complexities that could make the summer extra "heated" for everyone.

Summer planning for children in divorced families entails a myriad of details and negotiations. Some of the areas where parents report conflict are in scheduling their individual vacation time with the kids; transportation time and expense to a geographically distant parent; dealing with adolescents who no longer want to visit a geographically distant parent and those that want to spend the entire summer with the distant parent; transportation to and from summer camps; negotiation for payment of camps, daycare and summer activities and the list could go on. All of these negotiations are also fraught with the potential of conflict. Research in the area of divorce suggests that moderate or high levels of conflict are a hallmark of most divorces within the first two or three years, however, after that period most parents fall into a rhythm of co-parenting together that includes being able to work out summer arrangements (Blaisure & Saposnek, 2007). Clinical research suggests that 30% of parents have a notably difficult time establishing a healthy relationship with their former spouse and of that amount 5-15% fail entirely to establish a working relationship (Blaisure & Gleasler, 2000). The impact of the inability of the parents to deal with conflict over a long period of time is very well documented. High conflict between parents has been linking to numerous post-divorce adjustment problems with children.

If the parents are on good talking terms, the negotiation of summer schedules may be achieved by having a planning meeting with the entire family in which the summer calendar is devised and the money needed for activities is listed. Duties and expenses are then split along equal lines. However, when conflict becomes a regular thing between parents due to expenses and schedules it is rarely about these exact things. Ongoing conflict is usually a sign of unresolved power struggles.

The most effective co-parenting plans in the summer, as well as any other time of year, entail cooperative parents whose focus is to meet the needs of the children. The needs of the children in the summer are slightly different than in the school year. Homework and structure are not as much the focus as making sure that the children are well cared for when the parents work, having access to both parents, creating relaxing times and summer traditions with each parent and usually vacation times need to be negotiated. With schoolwork and holiday visits not as relevant during this time of year, parents who have not been able to successfully cooperate with each other may find that the lack of obligations make things go more smoothly between them. If this is not the case, and parents find it impossible to talk on the telephone with their co-parent or still can not tolerate exchanging the children with ease, the summer may be a good time to consider therapy to help find a way to deal with a difficult ex-spouse.

One need not wait for an ex-spouse to agree to therapy to come up with new strategies for making things more workable. A therapist can help individuals come up with practical strategies that enable you to talk with your ex-spouse in a way that does not make you feel taken advantage of or does not lead to more conflict. A good resource for divorce co-parenting is Julie Ross and Judy Corcoran's (1996) book, *Joint Custody with a Jerk*. The authors lay out a process that one could use to talk with their ex-spouse and help the child deal with the ex-spouse. Before solving the problem the author advises the parent to first determine who has the problem: themselves,

their ex-spouse or the child. Then the parent should empower the person who has the problem to solve the problem, but only after empathizing with their dilemma. Lastly, the parent is to hold their ground in not getting pulled into a problem that they are not responsible for solving. Some conflictual parents can make positive change from learning some techniques for adjusting their pattern of response toward their ex-spouse. Other conflictual parents need a more introspective type therapy which looks at their own contributions to the conflictual patterns that keep the parents locked into battle. Violence, or threat of violence, between spouses usually precludes a change between the co-parents unless the violence is eliminated.

Summer is a good time for kids to reconnect to a geographically distant parent. With the extra time which summer provides, parents can work to recreate rituals around meals and chores which were lost in the hustle and bustle of the school year, as well as share memories of vacations and outings. Summer may also provide a time for parents to reconnect socially to other families and other adults. Many parents pull away socially from support systems during the process of divorce due to being overwhelmed with the physical and emotional needs of the family during the divorce and some out of disappointment and shame from a failed marriage. Social support is a positively correlated with the healthy adjustment of the family post-divorce (Blaisure & Gleasler, 2000). This same socialization can become a point of disagreement between the co-parents when it entails one parent dating before the ex-spouse thinks is right for the children or socializing with someone the ex-spouse does not like. It is always awkward for a spouse when an ex-spouse starts to date or spend a considerable amount of time with a new person. Some jealousy cannot be avoided. The parents cannot interact in the same way as they always did. It is as if someone is always watching, listening or commenting on their conversations. At times, the new person is being intrusive but, it also may just be the discomfort of the new situation to the unpartnered spouse. When the old dependency needs and routines are threatened a certain level of discomfort is natural. (Pitman, 1987).

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