

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF THE COLLABORATIVE FAMILY ADVISOR

I am including below an extract of an article written by Dr Deborah Hecker who is an American divorce counsellor. She highlights the stresses on you and your children when facing family breakdown and separation. Deborah reminds us that children will not understand the changes that are occurring around them and will be very afraid. They will also be consumed with worry about your well being. As a parent who is facing separation, you will inevitably be consumed with your own personal distress which is likely to be overwhelming. That is why I recommend to all of my collaborative clients that they seek support from a Family Advisor as part of the collaborative process.

Best wishes,

Maura Mckibbin

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH HEARTBREAK – WHEN CHILDREN GRIEVE

Children are affected by divorce as strongly as the divorcing parents are. Age can make a difference, helping or harming depending upon the family structure and the child's emotional maturity level. For any child, however, a divorce between his or her parents is a deeply stressful event. Pain comes from several sources; a sense of vulnerability as the family fragments, grief over the loss of the intact family, grief over the loss of the non-custodial parent, intense anger in response to the family disruption, and strong feelings of powerlessness. Imagine all the emotions adults go through in divorce. Children go through every single one of them as well.

Children caught in a divorce are experiencing multiple losses. Any one of these losses is enough to break a child's heart. Taken together, they are overwhelming. Among the losses for the child are:

...Loss of the expectation that the family would remain as a unit.

...Loss of familiarity and routines.

...Loss of safety.

...Loss of home or change to dual addresses.

...Loss of childhood and innocence.

...Loss of trust.

Children are taught to love, trust, and honour their parents. They learn conflict resolution from their parents. Imagine how disturbing and confusing it must be to children when their parents abandon their pledge to love, trust and honour each other and fail at the very conflict resolution techniques they

have taught their children. How do parents teach their children about love and divorce simultaneously?

Fear of abandonment exists in all children. These normal fears of abandonment and loss are markedly intensified by parental divorce. The primary conflict children see in divorce boils down to the fear of losing both of their parents. They fear that parental love won't be there when they need it and that their parents may even leave or abandon them.

EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CLIENTS' ABILITY TO PARENT

The role of parent should not stop after divorce. Yes, the newly divorced parents may still be grieving, but they must not ignore the children's grief. Not only have their entire lives been turned upside down, but so too have their children's.

The ability of some divorcing parents to separate their needs from their children's and effectively parent may be so diminished that they are capable of completely overlooking their children's grief. While compromised parenting is an expected short-term consequence, there is serious potential for these changes in parenting style to become chronic if the parents do not focus on the relationship with their child.

There are other factors that make it easy for parents to disregard their children's grief. Children often mask their grief with other emotions – most notably anger. Depending on their ages, and personalities, some children may not even be aware of the loss while others may be devastated by it. Some children deny their grief due to embarrassment, their own anger or a desire to hurt (or protect) their parents.

In her article, "*Children After Divorce: Wounds That Don't Heal*" (The Psychiatric Times: Medicine and Behaviour. 8: 8-11, 1989), Judith Wallerstein notes that in the wake of divorce, most custodial parents exhibit varying degrees of disorganization, anger, decreased expectations for appropriate social behaviour of their children, and a reduction of the ability of parents to separate the child's needs and actions from those of the adult. This kind of parental behaviour can so overburden children that they may find themselves feeling responsible for their parents' psychological well-being.