

Psychological problems resulting from divorce source of great anguish



(This is the third in a three-part series dealing with the efforts of some fathers to gain custody of their children following a divorce and focusing on the obstacles he must overcome to gain custody of his children in a society which believes that the mother is usually the proper parent to take charge of their offspring's upbringing.)

By LAWRENCE BUDD
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PLANO—Serious emotional problems are an unfortunate result of many divorce situations as parents and especially children experience great mental anguish as result of the trauma created by this painful separation.

Numerous studies have been done examining different aspects of this situation and the effects upon both the parents and children. Many psychologists concentrate their studies solely on the implications of divorce.

Dr. Richard Warshak is one such psychologist. He is a clinical psychologist in private practice, a member of the clinical faculty at Southwestern Medical School and a research scientist at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Serious psychological problems are sometimes experienced by children involved in a divorce and there is a large body of evidence indicating that joint custody could reduce this problem, according to Warshak.

"The child experiences a feeling of depression related to the loss of a parent and lower self-esteem due to the feeling that something must be wrong with them for their parents to get divorced. With a joint custody situation, they have the continual reassurance that both parents are interested and will be involved," said Warshak.

Under the present custody situation, the custodial parent suddenly is given all the responsibility for supervising the children. Warshak indicated that this new burden added to the already difficult situation creates additional strain on the parent which can result in physical or psychological problems.

"The joint custody situation can help to reduce this problem as both parents share responsibility for the child. In most cases, after a divorce, both parents' physical and emotional health has deteriorated," said Warshak.

The mother, traditionally the custodial parent, often finds her new dual roles very difficult to play.

"There seems to be recovery period, but divorced mothers often report that having the demands of child care coupled with having to earn a living causes a great deal of stress and effects the quality of the relationship," said Warshak.

Warshak also pointed out that the mother often gets the feeling that she is involved in only the negative

aspects of parenthood as the father visits at predetermined times, almost exclusively to share with the children enjoyable, positive aspects of the relationship.

The father often encounters equally frustrating problems in adjusting to his new role, referred to by Warshak as the "Disneyland Daddy".

"They like this at first. I hear from a lot of fathers that they become frustrated and feel that their relationship with the children is too superficial and wish they could have a more meaningful relationship with them," said Warshak.

One interesting study Warshak cited found that fathers do not experience or may not be aware of the feelings of stress during the divorce, but experience their problems afterwards.

"It's as if the fathers have a delayed reaction. They experience more physical complaints and feelings of loneliness. The mothers have already experienced their problems and have begun coping with them," said Warshak.

The children and parents show a recovery period after one to two years and "gain a new equilibrium." But some children continue to have problems, according to Warshak.

"Particularly, in a mother custody home with boys. Girls tend to bounce back better. In the research John Santrock (a colleague) and I have

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Richard Warshak deals with parents and children suffering from the stress a divorce and has been involved in several studies dealing with this subject. He supports alternatives to the present system for settling disputes, which, in his words, "only perpetuates the conflict." (Staff photo by Jana Beall).

—Divorce's mental implications

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done, boys are doing better with the fathers. There is much overlap... but on the average the child living with the opposite parent generally is more aggressive," said Warshak.

Warshak stressed that the psychological effects of the divorce do not begin or end during the actual divorce proceedings, but are part of an ongoing process that begins before the divorce and go on after the divorce is finalized.

"I think it is important to realize that divorce is not an event, but an ongoing process. The short-term reactions run the gamut of emotional behavioral disturbances," said Warshak.

Some of the more common reactions of the children to the divorce are to deny the event of the divorce, exhibit immature behavior, or ex-

perience fears of being abandoned. The younger children are likely to feel that they're responsible for the divorce and sometimes become excessively preoccupied with fantasies of their parents getting together again, said Warshak.

"In relationships with their parents, teachers and peers, generally in the few months following the divorce, the children of divorced parents tend to be more oppositional, aggressive, and demanding," said Warshak.

Warshak would like to see alternatives to the current system which calls for the two parents hire lawyers to settle the case.

"The adversary system perpetuates the conflict between the parents. It's hard to see how the child could benefit from this. They don't cooperate as parents, as they're fighting for custody," said Warshak.

One possible alternative Warshak mentioned would be joint custody. Another, one which calls for the services of a third party, is divorce mediation.

"I act as a consultant and mediator, and help them arrive at a solution that is in the best interest of the children and try to diffuse some of the anger that interferes with them acting as parents," said Warshak.

Warshak commented on a growing trend in the country in which people are seeking to keep more control over their lives and cited this alternative—which takes the decision out of the judge's hands— as an extension of this.

Warshak has reservations about joint custody as a better solution in all cases.

"There are many problems with that arrangement. Some parents just

can't cooperate enough. Others live too far away for there to be any real sharing. I think that it should be explored more than it is," said Warshak.

One of the major problems that joint custody presents is the moving of the children from the home of one parent to the other.

We used to think that a child would suffer if he was bounced back and forth between homes. That's all that psychologist's would talk about. And what little we know about this now is that children can adjust to that. What they have trouble adjusting to is not seeing both parents," said Warshak.

"The courts are based on the formula that assumes mother is always the best parent. I think that we have to do away with that old "motherhood" mystique and consider each case individually," said Warshak.