



Spend time with each parent, if possible. Your relationships shouldn't have to suffer.

When Divorce Hits Home

By Cheryl Fenton

Maybe it was a few slammed doors after one-too-many arguments. Or it could have been silent, tense moments that seemed to haunt the family dinner table. No matter the clues, you knew something was going on between your mother and father that didn't seem right. Then you got the news it was over.

Divorce.

With 1995 statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau showing us that only 50 percent of all families have the traditional mother, father and one child under 18, you're not alone. In fact, other estimates predict that more than one out of three children born in the U.S. in the 1980s will experience the effects of divorce before reaching age 18.

This will be a difficult time for you and your par-

ents. Relief: "At least there will be a lot fewer arguments and less tension at home."

Loss of Identity: "Are we still a family? Where do I belong?"

Conflict of loyalty: "Can I still love both mom and dad? What will happen with the rest of the family?"

Helplessness: "Who can I turn to about my situation?"

Getting through the conflict

Don't go through it alone. This is not the time to think that you have to be grown up and strong. Stubborn independence can only backfire. According to Chirban, the "sleeping effect" can haunt a child who hasn't expressed her emotions about the divorce.

ents, but there are ways to get through what is otherwise a very trying situation for everyone.

"Everyone experiences it differently," explains Dr. John Chirban, a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "It depends on why your parents are divorcing and how exposed you are to the divorce. But teenagers do ask themselves several questions: 'Could I have helped do something to cause this, or is there something I can do to help repair it?' They are people moving through the [coping] stages [from] bargaining to depression to anger."

You can expect to feel a range of emotions:

Guilt: "Is this my fault?"

Fear: "Who will take care of me now? Who will take care of mom/dad? Am I safe?"

Anger: "Why did this happen? If only mom didn't get mad about Dad's golfing, this wouldn't have happened."

/ continued on page 48

Divorce

continued from page 46

"This occurs more with girls than boys," he explains. "It seems that girls are adjusting better, but in fact it is found there is a lingering sorrow. Children are often picking up cues from parents on what they need them to do. Trying to be pleasers, the girls give off the indication that things are fine. But then when the dust settles, the impact is felt."

To avoid this, Chirban suggests engaging in open conversation. "Describe your feelings, which are OK to have. If you can [share] your experience and be more aware and in touch with it, I think that the impact would be less."

It's OK to be confused and scared.

Reach out to your friends and tell them about your feelings and fears. Chances are you have a friend or two who has been through this before. They can be of great benefit to you, as you travel this rocky road. Remember, you're not alone and talking to someone can be a great relief.

Keep an active and normal routine

Books to Check Out

■ *Coping When Your Family Falls Apart* by Dianna Daniels Booher

■ *The Facts About Divorce* by Caroline Eversen Lazo

■ *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce* by Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan Berlin Kelly

■ *Surviving Your Parents' Divorce* by Charles Boeckmen

■ And get other kids' perspectives in *The Kids' Book of Divorce* by Eric Rofes/The Unit at the Fayerweather Street School.

within your own life. It's tempting to stay in your room and listen to sad songs during a tough time like this. Not a good idea. Soccer practice on Tuesday after school? Your buds want to head to the mall? Go. The ending of your parents' marriage doesn't mean your life is over too.

The same way your parents need to do what's best, so should you. You will need to maintain a level of normalcy in your own life, so that you can be strong and focused during stressful times. This is when you need to look out for you.

Ask what will happen next. You have a right to know when the divorce will occur, who will be living where and what changes will happen to you (for example, can you continue at your private school or will you need to transfer?). Open the lines of communication with both parents. Let them know your concerns and the things you feel most strongly about. While sometimes situations are beyond your control, expressing how you feel and your reactions to the changes are healthy and positive.

Stay neutral. It may be hard not to take sides, but it's important you understand the reasons for what is happening if possible. Unless there is abuse involved, you should be able to maintain a healthy relationship with each parent.

The key is to devise a plan, come up with a good schedule that meets everyone's needs. However, with emotions running high, don't get stuck in the crossfire. Your parents need to take responsibility for their actions and do what's best for you.

If one parent is speaking poorly of the other parent, Chirban suggests nipping it in the bud. "Try to help your parent in this case by signaling to them, 'I don't know if

that's good for me to hear.' That would cue the parent to stop," he suggests. "Most parents don't want to hurt their children, but sometimes in the volatile throes of a divorce, they don't have control because it's so emotional. Being split and pulled is not what the teenager needs."

Use resources available to you. So that's what a school guidance counselor is for! Pop your head into his or her office and have a chat about what's going on at home. They can help you sort things out and help you get the support and understanding you need. They may also provide you with some information on local support groups.

"You may feel like you need to take care of mom or dad, so you aren't necessarily in tune to your own feelings, because [you think] 'Who's really going to listen or understand?'" says Chirban. "Having an opportunity—whether it's with a counselor or a group or even a friend—to be able to share is very important."

Check out local resources such as your religious affiliates or counseling centers for teens. One to check out is Family Service America (800-221-2681), which has free information and referral to local family service agencies all around the country. Rainbows, an international organization to help kids deal with family crises such as divorce (www.rainbows.org), has dozens of statistics and resources to help you deal. They also offer a listing of registered Rainbows directors in your area for a little face-to-face time.

"When you do have such disappointment, it's difficult to decide where to bring your hope to," says Chirban. But you can come through this in one piece. There is hope; you just have take the time to find it within you. ■