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Divorce—The Broken Dream

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Divorce touches the lives of everyone in our society, either directly through family experiences or indirectly through friends. There is almost daily reference to the epidemic of divorce that is sweeping America and the corrosive affect divorce has on the American family. The affects of divorce on children, the students in our classes, need to be explored by the educators who interact with these children for approximately six hours a day, one-hundred-and-eighty days a year. propose to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of the staff and to provide practical lessons and activities for students on issues and problems surrounding and created by divorce. I believe that if students are to benefit from the educational opportunities offered to them while they are in our care, they must feel good about themselves and about the environment they are in. Educators cannot correct the problems in their parents' marriages, but we can be aware of and sensitive to the emotional turmoil that engulfs students because of these problems, we can work on improving students' self-images, and we can offer a caring, stable environment in a time of upheaval.

As an educator and a divorced parent, I have become acutely aware of the many difficulties faced by children directly involved in a divorce. Many times the reason behind students acting out, withdrawing or poor academic performance is that their families are being ripped apart by family conflict, talk of separation, actual separation, desertion, or divorce. It is very difficult to act "normal" when the very foundation of your life is being destroyed and you are not sure what is happening or why it is happening. Divorce produces a very wide ripple effect in the lives of children. Children struggling with a divorce may have reduced attention to schoolwork and fall off in their participation in school activities. New issues may crowd their minds: explaining new living arrangements to friends; the shock of possibly being uprooted from familiar surroundings and moving to a new neighborhood; the trauma of losing old friends and the ordeal of having to start new relationships; and the disappointment of a changed style of life. All of these issues are heaped on top of the more direct inner family problems connected with the divorce.

Many Americans believe in the typical stereotypes relating to home, marriage, family and spouse. They believe we all will date, fall in love, marry, set up a home, bear and raise children, work, and live happily ever after. When this stereotype is not fully realized, the bubble pops: Divorce signifies failure to make the dream work. Failure is felt by everyone in the family unit. Our society is constantly bombarding us with the stereotype nuclear family consisting of dad, mom, brother, sister and their dog. Advertisements in magazines, newspapers and on television portray the happy, good-looking nuclear family having fun and enjoying life TOGETHER. Television shows such as "Happy Days" and "The Brady Bunch" depict life in the nuclear family as a happy, go-lucky, almost trouble-free existence where everything always works out. But then there is reality.

In 1978, 18.5 percent of all children under 18 lived in single-parent families, and census bureau projections indicate nearly half of all children born in 1979 will spend a significant portion of their childhood with only one parent. This sizable population cannot be ignored by educators who work with them for such a large chunk of their childhood. These children bring with them unique problems that must be acknowledged and worked with.

Divorce is emotionally an extremely charged issue. Often the adults directly involved in a divorce are so wrapped up in their own needs, issues, and problems that they lose sight of the needs, issues, and problems faced by their children. We tend to treat children with a double standard. Children are expected to act grown up and mature in many situations—don't cry, don't be afraid, don't be a baby—but then we act as though children are incapable of understanding the struggles their families may be going through. Children are denied information and are left out of the process of making decisions about what is happening to them because of the divorce. I firmly believe that children are better barometers of emotional weather than are adults. You can fool an adult easier than a child. Children can spot a phoney or sense unrest a lot faster than an adult can. Some adults act as if the tension between them is invisible, as if their fighting is unseen and unheard. All of these behaviors are happening around children, but the adults act as if the children are oblivious to them. Many children are forced into acting as if the high degree of tension does not exist and everything is "A-OK". The children are expected to go on with life as normal without any or much of any explanation as to what is going on, until the final axe falls in divorce court. Many children, seeing how upset their parents are, do not want to further burden their parents with how upset they are. It is extremely important that the emotional needs of children involved in a divorce are not ignored by the significant adults in their lives, be they their parents or not. Children need to have some place in which they can work out what is happening to their lives.

There are many issues to be considered by the people who are involved with these children for a good deal of their waking day. One of the tasks is to understand the children's fear that THEY may have caused the divorce by something they did or did not do. If only they had been good, or better students, or if they had not been bad or failed at school, this terrible thing would not have happened. They believe strongly in their ability to cause things to happen. Many children feel that they may have wished the divorce into being. Getting children to understand that the issues in the divorce are between their parents and not their fault is a tough nut to crack. An other important factor is the need for children to know that they are not unique. Many other parents have gotten divorces and the children in those families have survived. Fear of isolation from family and friends is paramount in the minds of many children. Adults should remember that children do not like to see their parents unhappy. It is very upsetting to see the primary adults in your life so emotionally distraught. Children like to wage power struggles with their parents from a very early age, but they quickly learn that an unhappy parent has a great deal of difficulty being an effective parent. When a situation is charged with anger, as it often is in a divorce climate, children are vulnerable. They often are pushed into making choices between parents. The loyalty of children to BOTH parents is deep rooted in our country's family structure. To ask a child to choose one parent over the other, puts the child in a horrible predicament. Which hand would you like cut off? Your right or your left? Would you rather lose your hearing or your sight? What utterly ridiculous choices. The tug-of-war game that parents sometimes play with their children is unnerving to say the least. Each parent may pull at the child in an attempt to get back at the other parent through the child. Many children are made to feel like they are in the middle of a taffy pulling contest and they are the taffy. Relieving the child of any guilt and giving the child some space to stand back and objectively view the situation does a great deal to allow the child to get through a divorce with minimal emotional scars. Children need an environment where they can express their concerns and feelings about what is happening to their families and to them, but this is often denied to them because the adults around them discount them as significant individuals. It is hard for us to discuss sensitive topics such as death and divorce with children, although they are quite aware of both from a very early age on.

In such a negative environment as that created by divorce, it is difficult to perceive that positive things can come out of such negative experiences. But children can gain and grow emotionally by seeing the significant adults in their life work through and solve the problems created by a divorce situation. We can aid students to see that much can be salvaged from what seems to be a total failure, and people can work with problems, create solutions, and adapt to changes in their lives. Is the glass half empty or is the glass half full? Your frame of reference determines how you evaluate the situation. Our distance from their families' divorces can give us a different perspective that we can share with students, thus enabling them to look at the situation with more positive eyes.

I have found that to aid students in understanding divorce it helps to reflect momentarily on some points about marriage that are not usually looked at. First, marriage in America is not uniform. There is Connecticut marriage, New York marriage, California marriage, and so on for each of the fifty states which define marriage by separate definite laws. Many people get married in certain states for their specific marriage laws, such as a shorter waiting time or younger age limits. The differences in the marriage laws found from state to state come out of earlier times in this country's history when life was quite different in the various regions of this country. Today's society is radically different from the times that gave birth to these individual laws. Second, our society does not ask for or even expect any degree of preparation for marriage. Potential drivers have to take a test to prove their readiness, knowledge and ability to drive before they are granted a driver's license; but there is not any readiness test for marriage. Anyone may marry, provided he or she seems to fulfill whatever the marriage law requirements are for a particular state. Third, it is widely believed that men and women enter into marriage for radically different reasons. The man is ready to "settle down" to a more routine life. The woman has her romantic version of "and they lived happily ever after." So here we have a tremendous range of requirements for marriage, readiness for marriage, and expectations about marriage. It is no wonder so many marriages end up in divorce, just considering these three points and not even to mention all the other social factors that eat away at marriage.

Students from both "whole" and "broken" families start to view the end result, divorce, in a more objective manner after considering these factors that may contribute to a poor beginning in some marriages. This helps children to feel less responsibility for the failure of their parents' marriages to work. I cannot stress enough the importance of seizing every opportunity to reinforce that the problems are between the parents and not the fault of the children.

Divorce in earlier times was an action regulated by the church and strictly under the rules of the church. Now it is a legal action handled by the courts. All states have various laws on divorce and specific grounds on which a divorce may be granted. Adultery is the only grounds that all states accept.

The intricate legal workings that are involved in divorce are barely understandable to most adults let alone to children who are not usually consulted. But children do need to have some sense of the legal procedures involved in divorce. The following is a brief synopsis of recent laws that pertain to divorce. It could serve as a starting point for students in the legal maze of divorce. Activities 9 and 10 may be helpful also.

NO-FAULT DIVORCE This means that it is no longer necessary legally to label one of the partners guilty. Couples must simply show that they are incompatible or that their marriage has irreparably broken down.

EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION This gives the court more leeway in determining property distribution or maintenance. Credit is given for being a homemaker, parent, or career helper. Property acquired during the marriage should be divided fairly, even if it is in only one partners, name.

UNIFORM CHILD CUSTODY JURISDICTION ACT (UCCJA) This is a uniform system of determining where child-custody actions should be heard when there is a dispute between parents in different states.

FEDERAL PARENTAL KIDNAPPING PREVENTION ACT This empowers federal agencies to locate and apprehend parents who child-snatch.

If you feel the need to give students a more detailed description of the legal workings of divorce, consult Haskell C. Freedman's article "The Child and Legal Procedures of Divorce", in *Explaining Divorce to Children*, Earl A. Grollman (ed.).

The act of divorce has always been looked upon in our society as the escape valve that lets out dissident spouses from their marriages, thereby removing a possible source of contamination to the majority of "happy marriages." The reactions of society to the divorced people has not always been so compassionate. Some earlier accounts of divorced women would practically have you believing they were forced to wear scarlet "D's" around their necks. Students find it interesting that society is more tolerant today of divorced people, especially divorced women, than it has ever been. I have found activities 1,2,3 useful in having students explore societal shifts in attitude toward divorce.

A theme that has popped up repeatedly in discussions with adolescents over the years is the difficulty parents have in admitting to their children that they, the parents, are wrong about anything or that they have ever made any mistakes. If parents cannot take any responsibility in the eyes of their children for the little things in life that do not go right, how can they create a constructive climate to help their children deal with divorce? Activity 4 heightens awareness of admitting you are wrong.

Adolescents complain also that their parents do not talk with them. After some initial scratching of the surface it usually becomes clear that they too are guilty of not communicating with their parents. The teenage years are typically a period of withdrawal and independence from family. Getting family members into the habit of truly communicating with each other may be beyond the scope of responsibility of schools, but there are ways in which schools can emphasize the value of strong communication lines in everyday situations and especially in crisis situations, and how to start building those lines or how to strengthen them. The importance of being able to communicate one's feelings, especially when your parents are divorcing, cannot be over emphasized. Adolescents usually need help to develop this skill. Activity 5 has been effective in this area.

Parents and teachers are significant adults in the lives of children. Ideally, they are all concerned with the educational and emotional growth of the children. Instead of working separately or even against each other, it should be a partnership working for the good of the child. This is especially true when working with children connected with a divorce. Here are some points for teachers to be aware of when dealing with children in non-nuclear families:

1. Check out your own feelings about separation, divorce, and single-parent family life. Do you have any prejudices or bias about non-nuclear arrangements? If you feel you do have negative feelings about different life styles, this awareness of your feelings is the first step in broadening your acceptance of different family arrangements. Read appropriate literature, such as that listed in my bibliography, and talk with other staff members, social workers, pediatricians, other professionals, and the people involved in these family arrangements who can give you a more objective point of view.
2. Examine your classroom materials, textbooks, films, filmstrips, posters, etc., to make sure they

are not exclusively nuclear family in orientation.

3. Be alert for any personality or behavior changes in a child that may be overall changes or cyclic changes.
4. Build a sound parent-teacher rapport EARLY in the year. Do not wait for only the forward parent to approach you. Try to make contact in a variety of ways, conferences, letters to all parents and individual notes, telephone conversations, invitations for class observations and to help with school activities, and home visits. Try to give each parent some positive feedback on their child. Parents will probably be more willing to work with you on problem areas, if they sense a positive environment.
5. Try to hold conferences and special events at a time when the single-parent family can participate as a unit.
6. Do not continually suggest to parent and child that school problems may be the result of a divorce, thereby heightening the guilt in both parent and child. Work instead on ways to change the undesirable behavior without repeatedly ripping open the old wound. Include the child in these conversations.
7. Be willing to suggest specific agencies or professionals who could assist the family. Do it in a supportive and not in a punitive manner.
8. Make sure the school provides for children from non-nuclear families when activities such as Father and Son Nights or Mother and Daughter Nights are held. Perhaps, the school could designate family events instead of specifying particular parent-child relationships. Does the school environment encourage parents to attend nontraditional events, for example, single mothers going to athletic events?
9. Provide for discussions about divorce in your curriculum throughout the year. All children are aware of divorce either directly or indirectly. If they have not experienced divorce directly, many are afraid it will happen to their families eventually.

“The significance of divorce lies mainly in what it does to all who are involved. It is a major upheaval a time of radical change, requiring the most difficult and profound adjustments. To husband and wife it means an end to many cherished hopes and dreams. To children, it may seem like the end of the world.”¹

But it is not the end of the world for children. They have their whole futures before them. We can help our students to weather the storm and to grow emotionally, if we reach out to them in a supportive manner.

ACTIVITY 1 *Local Activities for Divorced People* .

The New Haven Register’s Weekend Guide, which comes out every Friday, contains a subsection “Singles” that offers a brief description of the week’s activities for a variety of social and supportive groups. Most

listings provide a member's telephone number. Assign a student or select a *responsible* volunteer to call one of these members and find out how the group works. I have found that most members are very willing to describe their groups to a truly interested inquirers. The students then report back their findings to the class orally and in written form.

As an additional activity, you could contact one of the local chapters of Parents Without Partners to see if anyone would be willing to be a guest speaker.

ACTIVITY 2 *Earlier Attitudes About Divorce* .

Have students interview older family members, friends, and neighbors about what attitudes toward divorce and divorced people were when they were young. The students then report back their findings to the class orally and in written form and a class discussion follows.

ACTIVITY 3 *Improved Availability of Financial Credit for Single Women* .

Have students investigate the improved credit climate for women. Women can not be discriminated against because of sex or marital status in applying for credit. Students can check out local practices and report back to the class.

ACTIVITY 4 *Admitting You Are Wrong* .

Give students a writing topic such as the following: Admitting you are wrong to people is not always easy. Are you someone who can admit your mistakes? Do you own up to ALL mistakes or just small or big mistakes Do you only admit to being wrong with family, friends, strangers, or to everyone? How do you admit to being wrong? Do you wait awhile or do you immediately fess-up? How do people usually react to your admitting you were wrong? How do your friends and family handle being wrong?

ACTIVITY 5 *Cartoons*

I have found the use of humor to be a tension releasing device. I use cartoons found in newspapers and magazines to look at some serious issues around divorce. They are great discussion starters or stimulators for writing topics.

ACTIVITY 6 *Communicating With Parents*

I have found that to get students to communicate with their parents you need specific topics that each will be interested in. One such topic, "The Day I Was Born," provides the basis for many discussions such as how children have effected their parents' lives. The following is an example of what an interview might look like.

Dear Mom,

It is necessary for me to interview you in connection with my ____ course. The purpose of the interview is for me to become more aware of my own birth and subsequent child development. This information will not be shared with anyone but me, if you wish.

Thanks for your cooperation.

Love,

My Vital Statistics:

Name _____

Date of Birth _____ Time of Birth _____

Place of Birth _____ City of Birth _____

Birth Weight _____ Birth Length _____

Obstetrician's name _____ Pediatrician's name _____

Pregnancy: Premature _____ Full-term _____ Over-due _____ Due date _____

When did you become aware of labor beginning?

When did you decide to go to the hospital?

How did you get to the hospital?

Could you describe the hospital admittance scene? Your reaction to nurses, doctors and hospital staff.

What anesthesia was used?

Did you have an episiotomy? This is an incision in the perineum, the area between the vagina and the anus, to enlarge the opening through which the baby will pass.

How long was labor?

Did you see my birth?

Type of delivery: Normal _____ Cesarean section _____

Who was in the delivery room?

Number of days in the hospital _____ Cost of doctor _____ Cost of hospital _____

Describe the room you were in. Did you nurse? _____ Did I room-in? _____

Who was the first visitor to see me? How was the food in the hospital? Was I a good baby in the hospital or did I fuss?

What did I wear home from the hospital?

Describe the day I came home from the hospital. Include the weather, how we got home, who came with us, who my first visitors were at home, what you had for our first meal at home.

Any additional information such as the reaction of grandparents, siblings, and other relatives, interesting events that were going on locally and worldwide at the time of my birth, would be appreciated.

Another topic for an interview that stimulates the sharing of common emotions felt in similar situations is early school memories.

ACTIVITY 9 Cartoons

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ACTIVITY 8 Posters

Students enjoy making up sayings and lettering them on posters. The overall topic can be divorce and making marriage work. Here are some examples of slogans my students have come up with that you can use to get your students going.

Sticks and stones may break my bones,

but DIVORCE hurts everyone.

DIVORCE cost more than just money.

BEWARE—Divorce hurts children

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Communicating everyday keeps divorce away.

Good marriages don't just happen.

They need continual work.

ACTIVITY 9 “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” or “ Dear Ann Landers/Abby”

Utilize syndicated columns such as “Can This Marriage Be Saved?”, “Dear Ann Landers/Abby.” Give students each spouse’s side of their story without the counselor’s conclusions or give the letter without the columnist’s reply. Have them write what their solutions would be to the problems and then have a class discussion that tries to arrive at a group solution. Then go over the counselor’s or columnist’s reply.

ACTIVITY 10 Divorce Court or Marriage Counselor

Most students have seen on television the shows “Divorce Court” and “People’s Court”. Have the students play-act out the courtroom scene in various divorce cases.

Another version of this activity that requires fewer students is to play-act the scene of a marriage counselor advising a couple. Provide students with a skeleton situation by giving them cards with the key problems in the marriage.

ACTIVITY 11 Field Trip

Arrange a trip to New Haven County Court-Family Division. This would require students mature enough to follow courtroom etiquette. Students would get first-hand knowledge about what it is like to go to court for a divorce.

ACTIVITY 12 *Divorced Children's Bill of Rights*

Give the following bill of rights to students. Have students discuss the merit of each article and suggest any additional articles they think should be added.

A Bill of Rights of Children in Divorce Actions

Judge Robert W. Hansen of the Family Court of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, is the author of the following Bill of Rights of Children in Divorce Actions.

- I. The right to be treated as an interested and affected person and not as a pawn, possession or chattel of either or both parents.
- II. The right to grow to maturity in that home environment which will guarantee an opportunity for the child to grow to mature and responsible citizenship.
- III. The right to the day by day love, care, discipline and protection of the parent having custody of the child.
- IV. The right to know the non-custodial parent and to have the benefit of such parent's love and guidance through adequate visitations.
- V. The right to a positive and constructive relationship with both parents, with neither parent to be permitted to degrade or downgrade the other in the mind of the child.
- VI. The right to have moral and ethical values developed by precept and practices and to have limits set for behavior so that the child early in life may develop self-discipline and self-control.
- VII. The right to the most adequate level of economic support that can be provided by the best efforts of both parents.
- VIII. The right to the same opportunities for education that the child would have had if the family unit had not been broken.
- IX. The right to periodic review of custodial arrangements and child support orders as the circumstances of the parents and the benefit of the child may require.
- X. The right to recognition that children involved in a divorce are always disadvantaged parties and that the law must take affirmative steps to protect their welfare, including, where indicated, a social investigation to determine, and the appointment of a guardian ad litem to protect their interests. ²

Notes

1. Earl A. Grollman, *Explaining Divorce to Children* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 3.
2. Haskell C. Freedman, "The Child and Legal Procedures," *Explaining Divorce to Children* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 140.

Recommended Books For Teachers

Bohannon, Paul. *Divorce and After* . New York: Doubleday, 1970.

A collection of articles that analyze the divorce process legally, culturally, and emotionally.

Gardner, Richard. *The Parents Book About Divorce* . New York: Doubleday, 1977.

A discussion of possible problems faced by children after separation and divorce.

Gettleman, Susan, and Markowitz, Janet. *The Courage of Divorce* . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974.

A thorough look at the antidivorce forces in our society and at many of the myths about divorce, such as that children are automatically damaged by divorce.

Grollman, Earl. *Explaining Divorce to Children* . Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

A collection of articles that cover various relevant topics that affect children in a divorce.

Grollman, Earl. *Talking About Divorce* . Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.

A starting point for discussions between parents and children about divorce issues.

Salk, Lee. *What Every Child Would Like Parents to Know About Divorce* . New York: Warner Books, 1978.

A look at the many issues and problems faced by parents and children in divorce . It is written in an easy to read style and contains sample case histories to illustrate points.

Recommended Books For Students

Gardner, Richard. *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce* . New York: Bantam Books, 1970.

A very readable book for children that gives straight answers and practical suggestions on how to make the best of divorce.

Gittleman, Steele. *The Kids ' Book of Divorce* . Cambridge: Lewis Publishing Co., 1981.

A “kids-talking-to-kids” approach written by a group of students based on their own experiences and interviews. It emphasizes the for children to ask questions and that children will not be totally devastated by divorce.

Richards, Arlene, and Willis, Irene. *How to Get It Together When Your Parents Are Coming Apart* . New York: Bantam Books, 1976. The issues around divorce are explored by the use of real case histories. The development of coping skills by children is stressed.

Sitea, Linda. “Zachary’s Divorce,” in *Free To Be Me* . New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

The easy to read short story of a small boy dealing with “his” divorce.

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Sirjamki, John. *The American Family In The Twentieth Century* . Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964.

Sitea, Linda. "Zachary's Divorce," in *Free To Be Me*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

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