

Not necessarily failure
and unhappiness —
if the parents recognize
that their youngsters
need them more than ever!

Illustration by Lucia

They both showed signs of anxiety. Paul, 5 at the time, suddenly began biting his nails and crying for no reason at all. Ward, 8 and gregarious, abandoned boys and baseball.

Joan says, "I'm not sure whether he felt uncomfortable when the other boys began boasting about their fathers, or whether he simply wanted to be as close to home and me as possible. Anyhow, it was obvious that both boys needed reassurance badly."

This strange period of tension and trouble before a divorce is universal. Dr. J. Louise Despert, a noted psychiatrist, calls this the time of "emotional divorce." She says that before any legal divorce takes place there is always an emotional divorce, and that children usually sense trouble, even though they can't define what is wrong.

Hard as this period is, it serves one purpose by helping prepare the children for the final break. In Joan's case, for instance, once the decision for separation had been made, she sat down to break the news to her

boys. She remained as calm as possible to keep any extra emotion out of the picture. She had rehearsed what she would say and how. Much to her surprise, Ward and Paul were quite prepared for what they heard. To be sure, they were saddened by the facts, and angry, too, at both parents. But they were also relieved to have the whole question brought into focus. At last they could pinpoint this frightening thing which had caused them so much anxiety.

WHAT DID JOAN tell her boys that day? She felt that there were four important things they should know without any doubts:

1. She wanted them to understand that regardless of what was happening, both parents loved the children as much as ever.

2. Because Joan's boys were small and sensed deeply their need for protection, she knew their first concern would be about who would care for them. Since she had already worked out that detail with her husband, she was able to reassure them

that they would remain with her but would visit with their father regularly and be welcomed.

3. She explained simply but honestly to them that she and their father were not happy living together now. But, she told them emphatically, this decision to live apart had nothing to do with anything the boys had done. She emphasized this point because she was wise enough to know how often children feel guilty about their "badness," and how easy it is for them to blame this "badness" for any ensuing trouble.

4. She told the boys that though she no longer loved their father, she still considered him a kind and fine person, a man they could always be proud of. She made this point because she knew her boys needed to respect and love both parents in order to mature into well-balanced adults and parents themselves.

Whatever the facts, a parent tells a child depends on many things: the child's age and temperament, his inner security, his relationship with both parents, his ability to accept reality and disappointment.

If there is another woman, an older child might be told that his father has found someone he loves more than he does the mother. In the case of desertion where there is little hope of a return, many parents feel it is better to face the truth with the child.

Whatever the facts, the wise parent refrains from defaming an ex-mate's character in front of the children. Joan stated this nicely: "Hurt as you well may be, remember this is an ideal time to indoctrinate your children with a little compassion. Let your children know that, regardless of what has happened, this man who is so important to them still loves them dearly."

Perhaps the best proof of the truth of Joan's statement can be found in people who refused to be merciful or truthful in talking to their children. Joan and I have a mutual friend who simply couldn't face the truth herself; so she fooled her children into believing their father was off on a long trip. It took months of psychiatric help to straighten things out once a neighbor's children exposed that lie.

Dr. Freda Kehm, director of the Association for Family Living, for 35 years a leading Chicago agency in the field of family-life education, recently described still another kind of parent. She told of a woman who had to justify her innocence in her divorce in an attempt to keep the children on her side.

"One suspects that mothers like this one feel compelled to explain how bad the father was in order to convince themselves, not the children," says Dr. Kehm. "To the youngster, Mother and Father are still 'my parents.' Rarely is there a bad parent and a good one from the point of view of the children involved in a divorce."

Once children are told there is to be a divorce, there are plenty of other troubles. Joan's boys were upset for a long time. The smaller one attempted to run away in search of a new father. The older one day-dreamed for weeks.

At this time Joan found a sad note he had written but never mailed to his father. "Dear Dad," it said, "if you'll come back, we'll see that Mom acts very nice. We will help, too." Facing reality is hard, and countless children—not only those hurt by divorce—try to get their heart's desire by wishing.

Joan remembers a hundred minor crises. Dad wasn't around nightly to kid with or to consult about kites or Cub Scouts. He wasn't available for baseball like other fathers. Everyone else was lucky! How could a mother understand?

Older children are apt to be critical or abusive of the full-time parent. Many children try to pit one parent against the other. Most children are angry for a long while. Small children may pick at their food, toss in their sleep, cling or demand. All these symptoms of inner anguish demand extra time and patience, unrestricted love, and a willingness to listen to woes.

YET THIS IS when the full-time parent is most troubled, too, and most in need of a sympathetic ear. Joan faced this problem wisely. She refused to share her worries with her children, and she knew that kind friends and well-intentioned parents could give little constructive help. So she turned to a family agency. The fees were modest, but the assistance she received—the insight into her feelings, the ability to plan wisely for the whole family—helped tremendously. Whether one chooses a social worker, a clergyman, a psychiatrist, a family doctor, or a marriage counselor depends on what kind of help is available in the area in which you live. The important thing is to get the best possible objective advice.

Joan had countless decisions to make: housing (whether to go back to her family or remain on her own); money (whether to look for work or budget closely and stay home with her boys); visiting arrangements (whether the boys would be happier spending a regular day or a week end with their father).

How did she work out these specific problems? She remained in her own house. She put off work until her boys were older. She and John worked out a regular time when the boys would go for a visit with their dad. In time their jaunts were lengthened to week ends and Summer trips during the father's vacation period.

"Believe me," Joan says, "the quality, if not the quantity, of John's presence was deeply meaningful to

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