

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

Divorce and Family

Dr. Gary Kneier, Ph.D.

January 2017

Divorce is the end of a marriage. It is not the end of the family. The real goal of divorce is twofold: to end a bad marriage, and to make the transition to a good separated family. Achieving this twofold goal is very difficult, both emotionally and practically.

What is not so obvious, but seems almost always true, is that these two goals— ending the marriage and transitioning to a good separated family— are closely linked. Each depends on the other. To the degree that separated parents remain intensely engaged through conflict, which is really a continuation of the painful and dysfunctional marriage, to that degree the family will remain a compromised family, to the detriment of all family members. To the degree that the parents are truly finished with each other and not affected by each other, that is, to the degree that they are truly divorced and their marital relationship truly ended, to that degree the family can be a place of respect, security and beneficial attachments. Conversely, the more that separated family members, parents and children, experience still being a family, the more likely it is that the painfulness of divorce can be accepted and left behind.

Marriages end: they die painful deaths, and they leave scars and wounds. Families live on: they are the creation of the marriage, they cannot be erased, and they redeem the failure and pain of the marriage that needed to end. No amount of blaming or arguing can change this: the marriage ended, the family remains and lives on.

Making this a practical reality is very difficult, given human nature and it's difficulty with saying goodbye to a hoped-for and longed-for connection. The transition from a married family to a divorced family takes time, patience, and creativity. Often, parents need help and guidance during this very difficult time. We humans are very sensitive creatures and easily hurt by ex-spouses. We carry deep wounds from the failed marriage.

Children are designed by nature to love and bond to people that are attached to each other. This is how they were created. They bond strongly to their parents. They make the marriage a family. When the bond between the parents is broken, when the marriage fails and ends, children's attachment world, their love life, their sense of family, are profoundly shaken. They are now in a situation where they love and depend on parents who do not love each other. This is stressful, painful and confusing. The degree of stress is directly proportional to the quality of the relationship between their separated parents. If the parents respect each other, are cooperative, and able to communicate and share the children peacefully, the children can adjust and maintain a sense of family. If the parents are in conflict with each other, disrespectful, angry or arguing, unable to communicate, or blaming of each other, the children's stress and

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

pain will be very great. This stress, pain, and confusion will lead to many troubling reactions in the children, the nature of which varies at various stages of development.

Invariably, in conflicted separations and divorces, the children's reactions become fuel for parental conflict. It becomes a vicious circle: parental conflict causes children's reactions, and children's reactions increase parental conflict. Maintaining a sense of family, essential for the children's development, becomes tenuous.

The irony is that the children's reactions are all attempts, in some way, to reclaim a sense of family. The reactions come ultimately from their need for family, and from the stress of family breakdown due to parental conflict. And, in fact, the children's distress and reactions are often the occasion for the parents to find some way to rise above their own pain and conflict, and to make the transition to a cooperative and functional separated family.

The conflict and reactions of the parents are very understandable. The failure and end of a marriage is one of life's greatest and most painful crises. It is a profound loss and setback, it often entails the collapse of a parent's confidence and even identity, and it activates a host of painful emotions—fear, anger, betrayal, failure, resentment, etc. The loss of a sense of family also is at the root of much parental conflict and stress. The children are the most precious thing to each parent: it is the children that made the family a family. The fear of losing one's connection with, parental role with, and sense of family with the children is indeed painful. In fact, fear is the source of most parental conflict.

Again, it is ironic that the conflicted parental reactions, which are challenging and stressing the sense of family, ultimately stem from their need to be a family and have a sense of family with the children. It is understandably difficult to make the transition from a married family to a functional separated family. Parents often need help, or time, to deal with their own pain, fears, and reactions. Yet, the children remain the one thing the parents will always have in common, and the most precious thing to each.

It is also ironic that parental conflict often focuses on differing values about what is best for the children. As each parent goes to war in the name of the children, each forgets that the war, the conflict, does far more damage to the children than the issues they are fighting for. (Abuse, of course, is an exception to this statement.)

A good part of Dr. Kneier's practice involves helping parents rise above their own pain for the sake of the children, and re-focus on the children, and on their reactions and needs. Such sessions are a mixture of mediation and counselling. The goal is to make the transition to a functioning and cooperative separated family.

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.
www.drgary.ca
Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

Marriages end, and tend to die a painful and stressful death. But families are forever, cannot end, and are necessary for both for the children and their parents.

Gary Kneier
January 2017