

Divorce of Low-Conflict Parents and Kids

Traditional thinking has it that only high-conflict divorces impact negatively on children. This is far from the truth. Divorce between parents of low-conflict impacts on children too. For these children, the issue may be likened to having the rug pulled from beneath them. Because the conflict was limited, they never considered that their parents might divorce. Hence when they do, it is experienced as a tremendous shock.

Certain couples with low amounts of conflict are more at risk of divorce than others. They include those with fewer ties to their community, lower religious affiliation or participation and emotional distance from their own families of origin. It is as if these couples have fewer ties outside of themselves to hold or bind them together. It may also be that for the children of these parents, that while they may have friends, they too may have less community and extended family affiliation. Thus without traditional supports outside of the couple to hold them together, risk of divorce is greater. Once divorced, there may be fewer supports separate from the parents to help the kids adjust and cope.

Children of divorce whose parents were low-conflict, report having a more difficult time trusting or believing not only others, but their own judgment with regard to relationships. They say they “Didn’t see it coming”, or, “If my parents seemed to get along and they divorced, what does that mean for me and the success of my marriage?”

As these children age, form intimate relationships themselves and eventually marry, they are at risk of perceiving their marriage to be threatened, even when faced with innocuous events. In view of their trepidation, they can actually bring harm to the marriage as their partner copes with what appears to be an irrational fear or issue. The partner may not fully understand or appreciate how unsettling and undermining of trust the divorce was in view of low-parental conflict. To make matters worse, the partner may enjoy a good relationship with the divorced in-laws and thus may be quite out of touch with their partner’s issues of fear and trepidation.

Parents with low-conflict who are considering divorce are well advised to prepare their children if this is the path chosen. This will require time and patience to allow the children the opportunity to process the information and come to understand the marital dissatisfaction that may have otherwise been hidden. The goal is not to invite or overwhelm the children with the marital issues, but simply to make them aware that they exist and as such, the parents are unable to continue as husband and wife.

It is quite likely that the children will react negatively. There will be shock and disbelief. Some may act out their feelings aggressively while others may internalize them, appearing quiet, sullen withdrawn or depressed. Family counselling to facilitate the adjustment can be helpful. The goal of family counselling is to allow family members a chance to express their upset in a safe and controlled space and then help members address concerns arising with the view to facilitating transition to separated parents.

Before even contemplating separation or divorce, parents are well advised to seek marital counselling particularly before the kids become privy to their distress. Counselling may actually address the issues undermining the marriage or alternately provide the parents an opportunity to plan their transition in view of the needs of their children.

Better to put in the extra step of marital counselling before pulling the rug out from beneath the kids.

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