



Helping Children Navigate Divorce

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Every time there was another crack of thunder, Winn-Dixie (my pet dog) acted all over again like it was surely the end of the world.

"The storm won't last long," my father told me. "And when it's over, the real Winn-Dixie will come back...."

"We'll have to keep an eye on him," my father said.... "We have to make sure we keep him safe."

"Yes sir," I said again. I loved my father so much..... I loved him for putting his arm around Winn-Dixie like that, like he was already trying to keep him safe."

Recently, during our bedtime story routine, my daughter and I read this passage from the wonderful book, *Because of Winn Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo. It's a story of a young girl, Opal, whose dog, Winn Dixie, helps her to find a sense of connection and joy in the world. Because of Winn Dixie, Opal is introduced to new experiences and people and finds a way to let go of some her sadness about her mother who left several years earlier.

The passage quoted above describes Opal's concern about Winn Dixie's fearful reaction to a thunderstorm. When Opal wonders how she can protect her dog through the storm, her father reassures her, "The storm won't last long.... And when it's over, the real Winn-Dixie will come back."

As I read this passage to my daughter, I thought of families I know -- both professionally and personally -- who have weathered their own storms, particularly related to divorce. During those storms, parents sometimes become hostile to one another and their families are in turmoil. Parents, children, and family can seem unrecognizable to themselves and one another. Marital conflict and change in the configuration of the family can elicit grief, anger, disappointment, and fear in children -- emotions that are often expressed through negative behaviors. A once calm and patient parent may become short-tempered, impatient, and unavailable. A child who felt content, confident, and ready to take on new challenges may become fearful, clingy, and irritable. A family with established routines, traditions, and dynamics often enters a no man's land where new routines, traditions, and relationship patterns have yet to be established.

The storm does pass for most families going through a divorce. The conflict wanes, stress subsides, and a new family order takes root. Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers, sons

and daughters, find new joys and gain footing once again. Unfortunately, for some families the storm persists and family life remains tense and unpredictable for months or even years.

While no one solution works in all situations, there are some invaluable tools that parents can employ to help their children navigate divorce and settle into a new, healthy, happier existence. Communication during these times one of the most valuable tools for promoting a healthier transition for the children caught in the middle. Communicating with sensitivity, respect, attention, and acceptance helps foster resilience and encourages them to cope in a healthy manner. Some specific tips are outlined below:

Be respectful. Anger, grief, betrayal, and hurt are natural parts of the emotional landscape during divorce. Anxiety about the many changes associated with separation and divorce is also common. In this emotional arena, the ability for parents to treat one another, themselves, and their children with respect may seem like a tall order. Nevertheless, respect is necessary for any healing to commence. Be aware of how you speak to your partner, how you speak about one another, and how you handle your own complicated and difficult feelings. Show your children you respect what they are feeling. Refrain from yelling, blaming, and criticizing, and try to cultivate honesty and compassion.

Keep it developmentally appropriate. The timing of when to share information about a divorce changes, depending on the age of the child. Generally, with very young children, describe the situation using broad strokes and let them know just a few days before the actual separation. Adolescents need more time to prepare for impending changes. Also, regardless of their age, don't discuss your partner's faults and refrain from blame. These kinds of comments only serve to confuse children and threaten to undermine your effort to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Be available for communication. What you say during a family "storm" is very important. "The Talk" about the divorce is not a one-time but an ongoing dialogue. Setting aside specific, regular times to communicate with children and to hear and respond to their concerns helps to strengthen the bond of trust between parent and child when they are feeling unsettled and that things are out of their control.

Listen, Listen, Listen. Listening may be the most important, as well as the most difficult, part of communication. Since it is often difficult for children (and adults) to know how to communicate their feelings, listen to more than their words, remembering that behavior and moods also communicate feelings when it is too difficult, or scary, to describe them in words.

Mix it up. The subject of separation or divorce may threaten to consume all of a family's interactions, thoughts, and actions. But children whose parents are divorcing are not only "kids with divorced parents." Remember, they are still soccer players, lego-builders, artists, readers, comedians, imaginary adventurers, students, etc. Continue to spend time interacting with your child in their arenas of interest.

Share the task of communication. Sometimes, the complexity and intensity of a child's responses to separation and divorce requires working through his or her feelings with a therapist. Counselors and social workers can help parents and children explore their feelings and reactions to the changes in the family, identify effective means for regulating emotions, find comfort and hope in a stressful time, and provide tools for coping. The support of friends, extended family, and support groups is also helpful.

Don't be afraid. A word of caution -- many families feel compelled to avoid difficult communication. As parents, we want to spare our children the painful reality that their world is changing, and we want to avoid the guilt and hurt we ourselves feel when we witness their discomfort. Avoiding communication, however, does not protect children from their intense feelings about the separation. Rather, avoiding communication leaves children emotionally alone in this difficult time. Open communication bravely acknowledges the truth and brings fears down to proper size, addresses them directly, and fosters the confidence that the family can handle the tasks ahead.

While divorce threatens to tear of bonds between family members, if it is dealt with thoughtfully and with respect, bonds between parents and children can be made stronger. If, as the protagonist in *Because of Winn Dixie* explains, "we keep an eye" on our children, "put our arms around them," and "make sure to keep them safe," we are doing our best to help children weather the storm of divorce.