



Stepping Forward from Separation and Divorce

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Forty years ago, couples stayed together for the sake of the children. Divorce created personal feelings of guilt and reactions of shame and embarrassment. To divorce was to air one's personal failures and entrust a court of law to assign blame to one parent or another. In the early '70s, as divorce became easier, the myth that children were resilient proliferated; what was good for the parents was good for the child. This new philosophy recommended that the parents not stay together simply for the "sake of the children."

Today's statistics are staggering. One million children will be the victims of divorcing parents this year. Fifty percent of those will be six or younger when they experience divorce. These statistics raise a question that should have been asked years ago: How are children impacted by divorce? It is widely accepted that when a child's sense of security is threatened, any number of emotional and physical responses are possible. Although the impact of divorce varies depending on many factors, including the emotional state of the caretaking parent, most experts agree that children experience divorce as a major loss.

Change is difficult in the best circumstances and changes brought on by divorce can be terrifying for a child. Children need to be allowed to talk about their fears surrounding these losses and to be reassured that they will always be loved and cared for by both parents. Conflicts between divorcing spouses often escalate after the separation; consequently, some men and women become depressed and anxious. Seeing a parent in distress can exacerbate a child's feelings of insecurity. If losses and fears are not addressed, they can provoke feelings of abandonment and rejection, resulting in a sense of concern for safety and security.

Another area of stress for parents and children is the formation of a step, or blended, family. Families need to accept, nurture, and welcome all family members. They need to look for creative solutions to celebrate the uniqueness of each member, accept and grow from losses, and be flexible. Children can gain love, self-esteem, and pride from a healthy step-family or experience anger, resentment, and feelings of being a second class member of a new family.

There are practical and emotional issues for both children and parents experiencing divorce that can lead to a variety of behaviors. A child may fly into a rage in a classroom because he is angry about a parent's departure. The thought may be "Am I bad enough now that you will come back?" Another child may become the perfect child believing that good behavior will bring the parents back together. Some children are so preoccupied

with parental conflict they become unable to focus on any task. Others have so much compassion for their parents that they become the confidante, the worrier, or the emotional support for the parent, at the expense of their own welfare.

Because parents tend to be focused on their own issues (finance, relocation, visitation and so forth), not to mention the emotional pain of divorce, it is often difficult for them to meet all the needs of their children. Parents may not want to let their children see them when they feel sad or angry. Often parents may not know what to say. Decisions concerning children are often made without any input from them. When children get overwhelmed with feelings and have no outlet, negative behaviors tend to emerge.

At In Step our goal is to offer a safe place to talk and express feelings. Groups providing children the opportunity to work through issues that they may or may not understand or feel unable to discuss with parents are appropriate during any stage of the divorce. Parents can also be taught techniques for providing their children with the best possible parenting, regardless of their own personal situation. Whether it is the beginning of separation or forming a blended family, the earlier in the divorce process that parents take advantage of this opportunity, the better the chance of a positive outcome for the whole family. Individual, couple, or group sessions provide an opportunity for participants to examine family issues they have encountered, share common concerns and develop problem solving strategies. We recognize how important it is for each person to have the opportunity to learn and grow through difficult stages of life in a supportive environment.