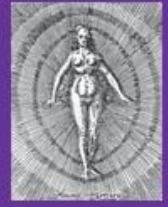


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Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



Children, Divorce and Self-Esteem

Have you heard of emotional distress and how it throws us off balance which affects our ability to cope with “typical” life change?



If we are fortunate enough to grow up in a family in which we learn to feel comfortable in our own skin, we are more likely to live fulfilling lives, take challenging risks, and actualize our potential.

But what happens in a family when this process is interrupted by the crisis of divorce? How does a child continue to develop a strong sense of self, have a sense of belonging? When the world seems to be falling apart how does a child grow to respect parental authority, and manage to get his developmental needs met?

Children, Divorce and Self-Esteem

Our *self-esteem* affects every dimension of our lives — school performance, peer relationships, career endeavors, intimate relationships, and parenting.

Being Both “I” and “We”

Most parents, even when going through a separation or a divorce, continue to want their children to feel good about themselves. But sometimes — even when the parents are caring and have good intentions — children begin having problems developing a sense of their own identity. How can a child continue to learn to be a part of a family (even a divorced family), and learn how to individuate and become separate from it? How can a child learn to become both an “I” and a “we”?

In my work with families, I find it useful to look at the parents’ communication styles with their children. Are they unconsciously sending any unspoken or conflicting messages? For example, when a parent says to a child, “*How could you do that to me?*”, the intent may be to address the child’s behavior, to punish or to encourage greater empathy or respect. What the child hears is that “*Having my own mind and my own thoughts is not okay.*” It also links the child’s actions and/or failures to the parent’s needs, which sets the stage for reactive anger.

Chosen Child

It is not uncommon in divorcing couples for one parent to choose a particular child to turn to for emotional support. However, this is a destructive dynamic that creates an undue burden on the child whose emotional boundaries are being violated. The child then internalizes the unspoken message that he or she must meet the needs of the parent. For the *chosen child*, this blurring of the parental boundaries results in an “emotional incest”, and the payoff for feeling special takes a heavy toll. While all children must depend on their parents to survive, the *chosen child* is caught in an emotional bind and

a role reversal in which his/her self-esteem is silently linked with meeting the emotional needs of the parent. As an adult, the chosen child is likely to perpetuate this pattern by unconsciously seeking a partner to satisfy his/her own unmet developmental and emotional needs. Such a dysfunctional family emotional system results in a sense of “we” without an “I”, since the child hasn’t learned to set emotional boundaries, or develop an identity separate from the parent. This leads to further difficulties in maintaining relationships and developing emotional intimacy.

Modeling Healthy Behavior

It’s natural for parents going through the process of a divorce to experience feelings of stress, anxiety, grief and loss. What’s important is how these emotional issues are worked through by the parents who need to offer structure and be supportive of the child who is grappling with his/her *own* issues of loss and fear, along with the unsettling reality that he/she has no control over these circumstances. Ideally, the parents need to separate the marital from the parenting issues, and model healthy, responsible behavior in response to their own feelings. This sends a clear message of safety and security to the child that offers containment for the child’s own fears and anxieties, eliminates cycles of shame and blame, and offers the emotional space for the child to grieve his/her own losses. This, then, creates a healthy emotional boundary between the parents and the child, encouraging the child to comfortably develop his/her own identity. When the child is emotionally free enough to be an “I”, and feels included in the “we”, the outcome is a healthy self-esteem which translates into a solid sense of self.

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