



tools of the trade
family improvement



How To **Cope** When Something Goes Wrong...

By Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A.

In today's ever-changing world, we never quite know what is around the next corner, and therefore we can not always be prepared. Two stressors that most often occur in families include separation/divorce, and death. Obviously, each of these stressors has its own spectrum of devastation, some of which is manageable, and some of which we have little power to control. Our most difficult job as parents is to protect our children from all the negative things the world presents to them. The most important job we have as parents is to empower and support our children so they are best able to deal with all the adversity they may encounter. It's hard to know the "right way" to handle a particular situation. I say there is no "right way;" you have to do what will work best for you, your child(ren), and your family, regardless of what others are doing. The two most important factors, in my opinion, to managing your family through a crisis are: communication and unconditional support. I know these sound very basic and almost trite, but in reality, they are probably the two most difficult things to do/give during a crisis.

When it comes to separation and divorce, several studies have shown that the children who suffer the least long-term trauma are those who were part of a "good divorce." A good divorce is a divorce where the parents get along and children have a relationship with both parents. Having a good divorce does not imply the parents are great friends; it suggests that they maintain a family-oriented relationship so that any negative impact on the children is minimized. This means mom encourages phone calls to/from dad, does not speak negatively about him in the presence of the kids, and makes visits with dad a priority, even when scheduling is difficult. The same obviously applies to dad, with mom. An enormous amount of stress can be kept off the children if the parents can keep their issues focused between them, and not involve the children. This is probably the most difficult thing to do during a divorce, as feelings are hurt, emotions are running high and "pay back" is often the initial, misdirected goal. A child's likelihood of developing adjustment problems following divorce has been studied closely, and has been significantly linked to the child's temperament and the mother's parenting style. Impulsive children will need parents to create boundaries and enforce limits because of their difficulty in managing their emotions and behaviors on their own. Too often, when we are in the midst of a crisis such as divorce, parents tend to compensate by going lighter on the children to make up for the discomfort they have to deal with. This is a big mistake; in the throws of chaos, children need the highest level of boundaries and predictable consistent outcomes.

When dealing with older children, all of the above applies, but we also have to consider that they will need peer support, such as a support group or short-term counseling. Older children will have experienced more in terms of the difficulties in the parents' relationship leading up to the divorce. They will probably have a lot more anger and resentment for the preceding years of discontent and for the current upheaval. These issues will be better worked through with a third party figure or a support group that is well facilitated.

Always encourage dialogue and offer creative outlets for the release of emotions. Art classes, journaling, song writing and music are wonderful tools for working through difficult times. Younger children, too, will benefit from similar outlets. Sports are always encouraged for physical energy release and to keep those endorphins pumping, but a creative outlet often helps them work through their emotions and let go of the negatives energies.

The stress that death places on the family is not unlike that of divorce, the environment becomes very shifted, and often a bit chaotic and unpredictable. When discussing death with your children, take into consideration their age and

maturity levels. Younger children tend to be very concrete, and they take euphemisms like a person "went to sleep" or "has gone away," literally. Your child may then be afraid to go to sleep themselves for fear of dying. Likewise, remember to really listen to what they are asking you and ONLY answer the question. We tend to give very philosophical answers to questions about death and dying. Children often just want to know "where is grandma now." An appropriate answer might simply be "grandma is now in the cemetery." Often this is enough, and if it is not, the child will ask additional questions. Children have a difficult time understanding the finality of death and will often ask several times if or when the loved one will return; be patient and simply reiterate that the person has died and can't come back, and they will not be able to see them again. This is often a good time to share your spiritual beliefs about an afterlife or heaven with your children, if that is part of your belief system.

Children ranging in age from 6-10 can begin to grasp the finality of death, but they also often personify death and think of it as something that might come get them, like "a ghost or the boogeyman." This is also the age at which deals are made. Children at this age think that if they do well on that test, maybe the person won't die. They will do best with simple, but clear and honest explanations about the person's illness or death. As children become older they start to understand that death is a process all living things experience. They understand that everyone will die someday, regardless of grades, behaviors or wishes. The teenage years are when questions of one's own mortality and vulnerability begin to occur.

I am often asked if the children go to the funeral, in the event of a loved-one's death. My answer, regardless of the age of the child, is absolutely- if your child wants to. This is entirely up to you and your child. Be sure to sit down with the child and explain what happens at a funeral, wake, or memorial service. Include the mourning rituals and what they might expect to see from other people who attend. Give your child the choice to participate in any and all, or none, of the process, and be supportive and accepting of his/her decision. If it will be too difficult for you to manage the child at the service and he/she wants to participate, then arrange for a close friend to assist. Be sure your child is comfortable with this person and that he/she is willing to leave at any point, should the child request. Do not worry about letting your child see your grief, pain, or tears regarding death. Crying is a natural reaction to emotional pain and loss; your child needs to see this from a primary role model. It is important to let your child know, however, that no matter how sad or distraught you are, that you will still be able to care for him/her and make him/her feel safe.

Much like adults, children need time, patience and lots of understanding as they learn to manage their grief. Let them grieve in their own way. Young children (and even older ones) may not show grief the way you would. They may react by acting out, becoming very hyperactive or impulsive. Teens might become angry and shut down or seek out only their peers. Whatever way your child reacts, remember not to take it personally; they need some space and time. Nevertheless, watch for signs that they might need additional help coping with the loss. If you notice a significant change in your child's behavior-if he becomes very withdrawn, or she starts going out all the time, experiences extreme anger or rages, and/or has grades that drop significantly, you should consider getting additional help from a school or religious counselor, therapist, or support group. There are many wonderful age and situation - appropriate resources out there. Seek them out and make use of them for yourself and for your children.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some "tools" that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article, please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iecounseling.com

