



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TASKS OF DIVORCE

A. TASKS FOR CHILDREN

1. Understanding the Divorce

Children need to accurately perceive the immediate changes that divorce brings and differentiate fantasy fears from reality. As children become adolescents and young adults they will re-evaluate their parents' actions and can then draw useful lessons for their own lives.

2. Strategic Withdrawal

Children need to get on with their own lives as soon as possible after the divorce: to resume their normal activities and to get back physically and emotionally to the normal tasks of growing up. Children need encouragement from their parents to remain children.

3. Dealing with loss

After divorce, children experience the loss of the intact family... [and often]... the loss of the presence of one parent from their daily lives. [If the latter]... children need to maintain a good relationship with "non-daily life" parent to promote their growth within the divorced family.

4. Dealing with anger

Children need to work through their anger, to recognize their parents as human beings capable of making mistakes and to respect them for their real efforts and their real courage.

5. Working out Guilt

Young children often feel responsible for divorce, thinking that their misbehavior may have caused one parent to leave. Children need to separate from guilty ties that bind them too closely to a troubled parent.

6. Accepting the Permanence of the Divorce

Children feel a strong and understandable need to deny the divorce. Children may not overcome this fantasy of reconciliation until they themselves finally separate from their parents and leave home.

7. Taking a Chance on Love

Children of divorce must hold on to a realistic vision that they can both love and be loved.

B. TASKS FOR PARENTS

1. Ending the Marriage

Parents need to bring the marriage to an end and in as civilized a manner as possible, realistically assessing the children's needs as separate from their own, and striking the best and ...["fairest" (respectful and acceptable to both)].... overall deal.



2. Mourning the Loss

Each ex-partner needs to acknowledge the loss and mourn the dreams and hopes that were never fully realized and never will be realized. It is important to cry because crying reduces anger.

3. Reclaiming Oneself

Parents need to establish a new sense of identity separate from the former partner.

4. Resolving or containing passions

Uncontained anger or a sense of outrage can erupt into violence which could result in children being used as weapons in the parental conflict.

5. Venturing Forth Again

Divorced men and women need to find the courage to try new relationships, new roles, and new solutions to old problems in both the workplace and sexual arena.

6. Rebuilding

The goal is either to create a new sustained adult relationship that will be better than the one left behind and that will include the children, or to establish a gratifying life outside of marriage that includes but does not overburden the children.

7. Helping the Children

Despite their unhappy feelings about each other, both parents need to make long lasting commitments to their children for as long as the children need them. This means providing financial support to the extent the child would have expected in the intact marriage and greater emotional support to offset the greater anxiety suffered by the child.

Excerpted from the book Second Chances by Judith B. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989.