

Observation on Family Communication Regarding Divorce

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### Abstract

The following paper presents a collection of research regarding the family communication environment before, during, and after parental divorce takes place. Post-divorce resiliency factors are also presented to display various factors that have been shown to promote a more positive and satisfying relationship after a parental divorce occurs. Before a divorce takes place, there are parent-child and sibling communication relationships that have been established over time. When divorce takes place, familial structure between parents breaks down and siblings are forced to respond to the changed environment. Sibling responses vary and depend somewhat on the circumstance. After a divorce takes place, new familial communication structures are created. Another very difficult factor is integration of stepparents into family life which adds tensions to process of recreating family structures. Attachment theory will be applied to this research to explain some of the difficulty in recreating a communication environment within a family during divorce.

*Keywords:* Divorce, Family Communication, Parents, Stepparents, Siblings

### Observation on Family Communication Regarding Divorce

Divorce is something that affects thousands of American families every day and the long-term consequences of relationship and communication patterns developed during these times are prominent. Siblings bond throughout these experiences and are influenced by the communication environment displayed by parents. Family traditions and values are altered and the security once found in the family unit is damaged. There are positive ways to deal with the changes and volatile environment surrounding divorce, but it takes focused effort and open communication to achieve those goals.

Communication within a family unit can have lifelong effects on a person. According to Adler and Proctor, Attachment theory says that bonds – both secure and insecure – are made between children and family members. Secure attachment can lead to confident communicating and constructive relationships, while insecure attachment can lead to anxiety in relationships and fear of abandonment or feeling of needs not being met. Family communication is role driven, there is comfort found in the structure within a family and expectations are set based on roles of each member. Roles include being father, mother, son, daughter, sister, brother, etc. When role expectations are met, families communicate in a positive way and relationships run smoothly. When role expectations are neglected, family communication patterns have added tension and conflicts arise. (Adler & Proctor, 2013) There is a significant amount of research available involving family communication patterns and relationship structures, but not many of them are in reference to a “pre-divorce” environment as to compare it to relationship environments during and after the divorce. These basic facts about family

communication structures greatly affect siblings and the likelihood of a family's ability to positively deal with a divorce or having a drastically negative impact on all involved.

When a divorce takes place, the security found in the relationships between parents and children and the communication patterns established over time become strained and sibling relationships often intercede and evolve accordingly. When children find security in their home and family, confident relationships are present between parents and children and if there is a problem, it is dealt with in a constructive way. A divorce takes away the security and attachment that children have available to them and replaces it with new communications structures, expectations, and even new family members (stepparents) that have to be dealt with despite what the children feel or want. The roles that used to structure their lives are now tampered with, and mutual respect isn't found between parents, mutual love isn't shown as an example to the children, and family values and traditions that have been established are seen as unnecessary or too difficult to achieve with the new relational tensions. These changes and sudden volatile environment have a profound effect on children and sibling relationships are shown to respond accordingly and often either reinforce existing relationships, or set into place strong bonds found through conflict.

To explore the sibling bonds and relationships that take place during divorce, Jacobs and Sillars, conducted studies within a group of communications students, mean age of 25, and coming from divorced households. Results showed that there were equal support relationships and directional support relationships. Equal support relationships showed siblings reciprocating each other's actions and types included: separates, pals, allies, and opponents. Separates did not talk about the divorce much and were

emotionally distant. Pals were close to each other but this didn't seem to be a result of the divorce. Allies were siblings that were close to each other as a direct result of the conflict experienced during divorce and appreciated having someone to experience the conflict with. Opponents were the least common category and showed mutual unsupportiveness. Directional support relationships showed "support was unbalanced due to age differences or unequal adjustment" types included: parent, protector, and encourager. The parent type was characterized by "high levels of instrumental support, informational support, and indirect emotional support from an older sibling to a younger child." The protector filtered information from their sibling to help them come to terms with the divorce, keeping secret information such as an affair, etc. The encourager was displayed between siblings who were closer in age and one was experiencing greater difficulty dealing with the divorce than the other. In conclusion Jacobs and Sillars, propose that sibling support is dependent on the environment set by the parents during the divorce. Parents who showed adequate support and transitioned into a restructured satisfactory family resulted in the siblings showing complementary support to go with parental support. During more chaotic divorce situations when the parents handle the situation poorly, a much more aggressive sibling communication and support system is established, sometimes leading to one sibling becoming primary provider for other children. (Jacobs & Sillers, 2012)

According to Cushman and Cahn, reasons parents tell children for divorce falls into four categories: excuses, justifications, concessions, and refusals. This initial step into divorce and communicating the reasons for divorce set the stage for problem solving and dissolving conflicts in the future within the new family structure and attempts to adjust the family back to "normal." (Cushman & Cahn, 1986) There are many ways that

this plays out in a divorce including: parents not disclosing truth on why divorce is occurring, parents not supporting children and emotions during divorce, parents speaking badly of each other to children, parents looking to children for support during crisis, parents forcing new relationships, parents forcing new family structure based around a stepparent, etc. These are vital factors in how the communication environment and relationships weather the volatile environment surrounding a parental divorce. These factors are directly related to the research of Jacobs and Sillars, displaying different sibling relationships in response to divorce environment and the profound effect it has on the ability of the children to cope with divorce. During the divorce, many conflicts arise out of an attempt to create a new environment to deal with parental situation, despite the fact that children are attached and sentimental toward life before divorce. The parent-child relationship, as well as sibling relationships are involuntary, whereas relationships between parents are not. This is difficult to realize when a child is used to their involuntary family life and can lead to emotional conflicts that parents do not consider when trying to adjust to a new family structure and communication expectations. No longer does a child go to their “parents” in need of love, help, or advice; they now go to their “mother” or “father.” Depending on how harsh relations between parents get during divorce, relationships can also progress to parents being jealous of relationship between their children and their “ex” and put further undue stresses on children often leading to directional support relationships mentioned in the research of Jacobs and Sillars.

After a divorce takes place, there are new communication environments and expectations for children. Siblings are expected to split time between parents, make an emotional effort to connect with each parent equally, and when stepfamilies are involved,

to include stepparents in activities that were traditionally from the “original” family unit. Three patterns of co-parenting take place between a parent and stepparent including: becoming disengaged, having conflict, and cooperating. While cooperating is the goal, most times there was conflict found. This is a result of dialectical tensions of a parent wanting to remain close with children and traditions while forcing the introduction of another member into these events who has not put in the time and experience as other family members. (Schrodt, Baxter, & McBride, 2006) According to Lambert, while some stepparents are disregarded as “my father’s wife” etc. by children, stepparents are also considered family by some children and sibling groups, but there was almost always a specific incident that solidified this place in the family. If a situation like this didn’t happen, bonds with stepparents weren’t as close and stepchildren reported not trusting their stepparent. (Lambert, 2008) The children in a divorce are left to deal with these relationships and new people being introduced on behalf of their parent. It creates another dialectical tension, except on the part of the child, to try to remain loyal to their involuntary family (mother, father, siblings) and to reinforce traditions and old family structures, while being forced to deal with a voluntary relationship with a stepparent. Some parents going through a divorce make the mistake of forcing children to view a stepparent with the same status they view their opposite biological parent. This leads to a more aggressive sibling relationship trying to protect each other and creating an “us” vs. “them” mentality with stepparents.

There are ways to successfully deal with a divorce in families and promote resiliency in communication patterns and relationships. According to Greeff and van der Merwe, there are eleven main factors that helped divorced families through a stressful

time: intra-family support, family support, support of friends, faith, open communication among members, positive attitude toward the family's future, financial security, work security and support of colleagues, social support, sharing of experiences, and "other" reasons cited by participants. (Greeff, & van der Merwe, 2004) These results are supportive of the fact that with open communication systems between parents and children, and parental support to the emotions being experienced by their children a peaceful life can follow divorce. To achieve this it takes focused effort to respect existing relationships between siblings, parents and children, and parents mutually. The introduction of stepparents can be accomplished but should be approached as a voluntary relationship not threatening toward existing parental relationships with children and traditions. Successful experiences and interactions throughout divorce can shape future communication relationships for members of the family in both a positive and negative way. There is room for future research on the before and after effects of divorce on parent-child relationships, as well as research comparing the differences in a young child (<18) and an adult child (18+) dealing with divorce and the effects it has on each group.

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