



When Mom and Dad Say "I Don't"

By Mary O. Parker

Rich Franklin remembers the moment his world was turned upside-down as if it was just yesterday.

"I was watching a football game on TV with my sister when my parents came into the room and said they needed to talk to us," he recalls. As his father began to speak, Franklin already had a good idea of what he was about to say. "I'd heard my parents yelling at each other sometimes at night and once I think I heard a dish being thrown."

But even anticipating his father's news didn't mitigate the Portland resident's reaction. "When he said it, I felt my stomach knot up and my mind just going blank."

Kathy Hall, a Newburg resident, was an 8-year-old third-grader when her parents told her they were getting a divorce. Her reaction was similar to Franklin's. "The wind was

knocked out of me and I couldn't really understand what was going on," she recounts.

When Diane Thomas' mom told her she was divorcing her dad, Thomas says, "It was like I'd been kicked in the stomach and I felt panic. It was hard to breathe and I would sigh every couple of minutes, all day, everyday, for weeks and weeks."

She says that even today, forty-eight years later, "I still get that feeling every time something bad happens."

Experts say it's common for children to have such extreme initial responses when receiving this sort of terrible news. But they warn that this reaction is just part of a process that can take years. For Franklin, who was eleven when his parents divorced, it took until high school before he was able to feel as if "we were all better off for it."

When coming to terms with a divorce, there are two main issues kids must work through.

The first is the loss of stability that comes with the loss of the family unit. For the child of divorce, life afterward will never again have the same sense of solidity.

The other issue is the loss of the family unit itself. Psychologists say this part of divorce fall-out can be heart wrenching for children, even when the dissolved marriage was at the core of a terrible home environment.

Franklin agrees that losing the family unit was the toughest part. He says that when he was a kid what he missed most was "living in one place, holidays together, being together." It was the same for Hall, who says she missed "just having my mom and dad in the same house and not having to pack up my things each week to have my visits on the weekends."

And, as if missing the family unit isn't tough enough, often parents make it harder on kids by pitting one parent against another. Franklin recalls wishing that his parents would stop

putting him and his sister "in the middle of their communication."

Portland-area child therapist Margaret Schilling says it causes children lots of stress if one parent talks badly about the other. "Parents should express disgruntlement with friends and confidants rather than the children," she recommends. "At the same time, it is important for parents to let children express their range of feelings from sadness to happiness."

According to Dr. Mark Gundry, this is one of the reasons that divorce is tougher on kids than it might otherwise be.

Parents are often either unconscious or uncaring about the effect that their conflicts are having on the children, explains the Portland therapist. "Conflicts can be acted out in divorce and custody battles, or submerged in ways that poison," he says, "Either way, children are like lightning rods for parental issues, and often develop emotional distur-

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Divorce: Another View

By Catherine Parkinson

Although for many reasons it was devastating when my parents divorced, I remain thankful that on the day they decided to part forever, our nightly ritual--huddling on my brother's bed, he and my sister clinging to one another, listening and crying, as my mother and father fought -- also came to an end. Their fights were loud and they would hurt each other with anything handy: words, physical blows, china and furniture. I am not an advocate for divorce, but believe children can suffer more when two people who hate one another stay together than if they don't.

As a counselor, I have counseled men and women who carry the scars of parents who stayed together for what's termed the "children's sake." Unfortunately, human nature decrees that there will always be people who marry for the wrong reason, bear children, and then regret their marriage. Whether the parents stay together or not, children may suffer the consequences of a marriage that was not built on a strong foundation.

bances that reflect what is going on with the parents. The more conscious parents can become of their issues, the better off children tend to be in the short and long terms."

In a divorce situation, children have their own losses to grieve. They need opportunities to speak about their feelings and be heard without Mom and Dad judging whether or not the feelings are legitimate.

Hall says, "It took a good five years before I could talk about [their divorce] without crying." Even years later, she admits, "I'm still working on it."

When asked if she thought it would have been better had her parents stayed together, she responds, "Yes, I think it would have been better in some ways, but I am a better person for having to work through everything."

Franklin's not sure whether things would have been better had his parents remained married, but says that if they'd stayed together "and hated it," then "I think my childhood would have been worse."

Even as grown-ups, the residue of divorce continues to linger, especially when the issue of their own marriage arises. At the thought of taking the plunge themselves, adult children of divorce find themselves revisiting painful

memories. These memories tend to conjure up questions about the sustainability and reality of a life-long happy union.

But if there's a silver lining in the childhood pain of divorce, it's a certain wisdom that's been brought into adulthood. Hall says her experiences made her think hard about marriage and what it meant to her before jumping into it. "I feel that marriage is such a strong commitment to another person that you agree to work on it everyday and not give up when things get tough," she says. Her introspection apparently worked: she and her husband have been married for 25 years.

Such caution aligns with U.S. trends. Folks are thinking longer before saying "I do" and today the average age for a first marriage is 26 for women and 27 for men. Compare that to the 1960's average of 20 and 23, respectively.

Thomas says that her parents' divorce "didn't make me not want to get married, I just wanted my marriage to be better than theirs." When it wasn't, she says, she decided she was better off "happily divorced."

Sadly, Thomas' case also shadows trends. While the divorce rate in the United States has continued to slightly decrease since 1980, according to a study released by Rutgers University in 2005, there's still almost a

50% chance that a marriage will end in divorce.

Considering this, and his own history, Franklin says, "I miss having a more idealized view of marriage." He's been wary in his approach to tying his own knot, admitting that his parents' divorce made him "much more hesitant about marriage than I think I would have been." Hesitancy like his may be reflected in the fact that, while the divorce rate has declined, so too has the marriage rate. In 2004, the number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women (the figure used to determine the overall national rate) was 39.9 compared with 1970 when the rate was 76.5.

But after much consideration, Franklin recently announced that he's ready to throw caution to the wind. Now happily engaged, he says he's been inspired by his fiancée's parents and how successful and stable their marriage has been.

"It's given me hope," he says, "that it can work, and that's when I decided to go for it."

Freelancer Mary O. Parker writes from her heart about issues affecting children and families. Her parents never divorced, but unfortunately she did, witnessing first-hand how it affected her son.

