

Pick Up Sticks – Picking up the Pieces the Morning after.

*This speech was presented by our Senior Counsellor / Associate Consultant, Mrs Saradha Ramachandran, at the **Children & The Law Conference 2005** organised by the Law Asia & The Law Society of Singapore.*

“Divorce is a time of change from the stability that was established prior to the event. It affects both the children and adults. The extent to which children are affected varies and the effects will be determined by not one, but several factors like age, gender, personality, family background and relations, repertoire of coping skills and so on.

The children grieve the absence of a parent at home. Grief is a normal, natural, appropriate and healthy reaction to a significant loss. Children may encounter shock, anger, sadness and other feelings. They may feel rejected, vulnerable and betrayed. Some children are not told about the divorce and the related changes. Some feel guilty, afraid that they are responsible for the family breakdown in some ways. The self-esteem of the children is affected. Parents feel that the children are too young to understand and hence it can be discussed later on. Sometimes parents are not sure how to talk about the divorce to the children even though they feel the need to. However, children observe the situation at home and make their own conclusions, which may not be the true picture as they are not able to clarify their observations. Insecurity and uncertainty may result.

Children may not have the resources to cope with the losses and changes that arise from the divorce. They may not know how to handle their different feelings. The different ways of coping may include denying or pushing aside what is happening to them. Some children do talk about the divorce, which may also be an indicator of the support they need during the transitional period. Sometimes parents send a message not to talk about the divorce to the people around them for fear of rejection.

Outward behaviour is a reflection of the children's internal world. When children have difficulties coping with the divorce, they may show it through their behaviour such as withdrawal, temper tantrums, clinging behaviour, getting into fights, drop in academic performance and crying.

The ability of the children to cope with the divorce depends on their parent's coping skills. Like children, parents also grieve the loss of an important person in their life. They also have to deal with their unmet hopes, dreams and expectations. The parents may also have to cope with being the sole breadwinner of the family and taking care of the children alone. This could be stressful for the parent when he or she is trying to meet the needs of the family as well as bring stability to the family. As a result, children have to cope not only with the absent parent but also the care giving parent who is unable to parent effectively.

Some children are caught in the loyalty conflict where parents and relatives harbour anger and resentment towards the other parent. Other children do not want to share their thought and feelings, fearing that they will hurt their parent or upset them. Parents, on the other hand, have similar difficulties. They feel that keeping sadness to themselves would spare the children from feeling hurt or depressed. By trying to help their children cope with the loss, they may be hindering the grief process. Some others are aware of their ineffective parenting skills and feel powerless. Some single parents do not know how to handle their emotions and usually divert their mixed feelings to their children. For example, the anger towards their ex-spouse might affect the way they treat the children especially if the child's characteristics or personalities resemble the ex-spouse.

Recovery from a divorce for the families does not mean simply putting it aside, cutting off all emotional experiences and burying them. The feeling of pain, anger and disappointment will not diminish at once. A holistic awareness of the impact of the grief on the family members will facilitate positive transition in these families.

Recovery involves not only initiating change and rebuilding of self, but also that of family. Family as a whole will have to be recognised and reinvested in other family relationships and life pursuits. Recovery as a family involves realignment of relationships and redistribution of role functions to buffer stress, to bring stability in the family and carry on with family life.

It is necessary to recognise and tap on the family's and each member's strengths and resources available within the family and outside in the community to help them cope with grief and re-organisation. Rebuilding the resources and support network of the families would help them through this period of transition and readjustment.

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