

Pain and Triumph for Children of Divorce

By Beverly and Tom Rodgers Marital and Family Therapists

Children of divorce are at higher risk for divorce than children of intact families. You would think that this would deter the younger generation from matrimony, but findings show that generation Y is more motivated than ever to get married and stay married. We as a culture should do everything we can to help them meet this goal. Our churches can do much to help these young married hopefuls stay married for a lifetime.

In 1965 the divorce rate surged, peaking in 1979 at the rate of 23 divorces per 1000 couples. This was the boomer generation who ended their marriages in record numbers leaving their children bereft, not knowing what a healthy lasting marriage is all about. It was even true of the church whose divorce rate was no different than that of the secular community. Rather than steering clear of marriage these boomer-off-spring are embracing it. According to Pamela Paul in her book, *The Starter Marriage*, "Today's generation is reacting against divorce by romanticizing marriage. They are searching for the permanence and connection that was lost when their families dissolved. This younger, more hopeful generation wants what their parents rejected and is seeking it in increasing numbers."

Culture is obliging these young hopefuls with a more positive take on marriage as well. We are becoming "The Marriage Culture" with television shows like, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, *The Bachelor*, *Bachelorette*, *Married in America* and Regis and Kathie Lee's *Wedding Week*, which had 10,000 applicants who wanted to tie the knot on live TV. A 1996 *Redbook* article by Lois Smith tells, "Why Marriage is Hot Again." On June 11, 2000 *The New York Times* reported that the "I do's" were expected to reverberate more than usual this year." This was published before the September 11th tragedy which has only spurred marriages on. In October, 2001 the New York Times reported that Fayetteville NC chapel owner Mary Spicer says there have been a record number of marriages since the 9/11 bombings. "Our chapel does 50 weddings a year and did 17 last week."

Sentiments were echoed in Norfolk, VA. Not only are the number of marriages increasing, but the number of divorce dismissals have also increased. In Harris County Texas there was a record number of divorce dismissals. District Court Judge Linda Motherly says that there is a general sense that people realize that their lives have changed forever. When a couple files for divorce their problems seem insurmountable, but in a tragedy like this it puts everything in perspective. They feel like the things they worry about are small potatoes compared to the trade center families. It seems that after a brief period of the anti- marriage sentiment of the 60's and 70's America is harkening back to a pro-marriage position.

The problem is that this young, brave generation with its positive spin on marriage has poor role models of what a healthy marriage should be. Not only do they not have healthy role models, but they are indeed harmed from their parent's divorce. Children of divorce display problems in the following areas:

Self-esteem---how they feel about themselves

Performance---how they function, grow and adapt to life

Social skills---how they get along with peers, work, church, community and the world at large

Intimate relationships and marriage---how they respond to intimates

The Heritage Foundation's June 5, 2000 Report on *The Effects of Divorce on America* states that children of divorce suffer from more depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, have higher rates of suicide, feelings of rejection, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency and criminality and diminished learning capacity which leads

to more school failure. They have poor interpersonal relationships, are increasingly the victims of abuse and neglect, and are two times as likely to divorce than children from intact families.

Mavis Hetherington's *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (Norton 2002) states that 25% of children from divorce have serious social, emotional, or psychological problems. They are depressed, impulsive, irresponsible, or anti-social. 20% of children in stepfamilies are emotionally troubled in contrast to 10% of children from intact families. Fewer than 20% of young adult stepchildren feel close to their step moms. 70% of young people from divorced families see divorce as an acceptable solution, even if children are present. Only 40% of children from intact families have this attitude. With this baggage the pro-marriage generation has a lot of weight to carry up the hill of successful matrimony.

In our work we have also found some common wounds of adult children of divorced parents

- The inability to trust in relationships
- Fear of failure and doom—the sense that "the other shoe is going to drop" anytime things go well.
- Insecurity which causes them to become controlling in relationships or become passive-aggressive and resist the requests of their partner.
- The inability to communicate effectively.
- No role models of problem solving or conflict resolution because their parents' only solution to their problems was dissolution.

Solutions to the Wounds of Divorce for Adult Children

- Awareness of how your parents' divorce affected you
- Dealing with the pain of their divorce and moving to a place of healing and forgiveness
- Putting the unhealthy thoughts and beliefs about yourself and your marriage behind you
- Learning marriage relationship skills.

Marriage Skills Can Help Young Couples

Diane Solee, Director of the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education, says that with one in two marriages ending in divorce it is time that couples learned that marriage, like any other valuable asset, is a skill. It has to be learned. She states. "I wish that brides could have a bridal registry of marriage skills courses. New marriage research show us what makes marriages work and what causes them to fail. Teaching this to young newlyweds can serve as divorce prevention, a route not available to their parents. All couples disagree. They just need to learn the skills on how to handle them."

Special Marriage Skills Designed for Adult Children of Divorced Parents

In our book, *Adult Children of Divorced Parents: Making Your Marriage Work* we have designed many specific marriage skills just for adult children of divorced parents. Often ACODP's as we call them respond poorly in marital situations and have no idea why they react in unhealthy ways. The answer to their behavioral dilemmas may be locked in their unconscious and awareness of how their parent's divorce affected them can be very helpful. We have developed an exercise called **My Parent's Divorce Saga**, in which the person writes a narrative of his or her parent's divorce including important dates, times, places and especially feelings. This exercise often unearths important information that leads to healing. It also can show

adult children how these wounds are haunting them in their marriage.

Adult children of divorced parents also internalize certain destructive beliefs that are programmed into their psyches. Beliefs like: Marriage does not work, If my parents failed at marriage, then I will fail also, all conflict is bad because it will bring about the failure of my marriage. These false beliefs can make for an unhealthy marriage and can even foster divorce. We have developed an exercise called **The True Vision Exercise** that is designed to help ACODP's dispel their false beliefs about marriage. Here is how it works.

Draw a line down the center of a piece of paper, making two columns. At the top of the right column write the word "BELIEFS." Under this column write all of the false beliefs that have been a part of your thinking as a result of your parent's divorce. At the top of the left column write the word "EVIDENCE" Now move into the logical, rational, left side of the brain. This is the side that makes decisions on facts, not feelings. Under this column, write all the objective observable realities that you can which you know to be true. List all the data you can to prove that your impression or idea is true. You may use what your partner says and does, as well as background information, as a means of determining the truth as objectively as possible. Here is an example of this exercise.

Under the column of BELIEFS you may write:

- My father cheated on my mother therefore men are not to be trusted.
- Most men cheat.

- Since my mother wasn't enough to keep my father, then I will not be enough to keep my mate.
- Marriage does not work

Then list the EVIDENCE showing the truth as you know it about you, your spouse, and your marriage.

We believe in Marriage...till death do we part

We believe in Christ as the center of our marriage

We go to church almost every Sunday and believe in the Ten Commandments.

We will learn skills to make our marriage work and practice them regularly

Make several copies of this list and put it where you would see it several times a day, like on the bathroom mirror, on the fridge, in the kitchen, or taped on the computer monitor. Read the list every time you walk by a copy and repeat it to yourself daily, whenever you feel fearful. Eventually, this repetition will begin to reprogram your unhealthy thoughts and feelings. Researchers have found that replication, that is repeating a process over and over, is the best way to reprogram trauma from childhood. You do not have to live in the shadow of your parent's divorce. You can be set free.

To order a copy of *Adult Children of Divorced Parents: Making Your Marriage Work* visit Adult Children of Divorced Parents.com or call Rodgers Christian Counseling 704 364-9176