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Adults Can Help Children Cope With Divorce

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LUBBOCK – Divorce is an emotionally overwhelming experience, especially for children. It is a journey that requires a plan to help lessen its impact on children, said Dr. Patricia Driskill, a private practice psychologist.

Distill was a keynote speaker at the 2007 Building Strong Families: Tools For Success parenting conference in Lubbock. Founded by the Lubbock County Partners for Parenting Coalition, the conference is designed for parents and professionals who work with parents in a 20-county area surrounding Lubbock.

"We know from decades of research how divorce will affect children generally. Adults can set the emotional tone of the experience and benefit the child," Distill said. "They will follow your emotional lead."

Some general indicators from research indicate that children fare best in divorce when:

- They remain free of the adults'/parents' conflict
- Both adults remain "active parents" if both are capable

"Children of divorcing parents experience adjustment problems, but not as much as we previously believed," she said. "Divorce does not destine them to difficulty. To gauge how they are doing, pay attention to how they are faring at school, at home and with their friends. These are good indicators to monitor."

Children react differently to divorce at different ages, she said, but even the very young sense and soak-up emotion and tension. Preschool children, for example, often slow down on the road to independence as a consequence of divorce, fearing loss of a parent or often feeling responsible for what occurs.

From six to eleven, children often regress and withdraw from the larger world, hide their feelings and display less understanding. Adolescents are often slower to develop their own identity and show separation from parents, and they can be angry and rebellious when coping with divorce, Distill said.

"That rebellion or anger can affect their relationships with others, and their sexuality," she said. "But there are some ways to help children of any age deal with divorce."

She offered these pointers:

- Make sure they have regular contact with both parents.
- Parents shouldn't criticize each other around the children.
- Establish and stick to a normal daily routine based on the children's needs.

- Respect their privacy.
- Be consistent and spend time with them.
- Encourage them to talk.
- Communicate with them honestly and don't involve them in your conflicts.

Adults should also reassure children they aren't to blame for the situation, in words and actions, she said.

"They should know divorce is permanent, so be honest with them," Driskill said. "Make talking to them a top priority and give them your full attention. Ask open questions and talk to them in an environment they find comfortable. These things can lessen conflict and help children cope with the emotional upheaval that comes with divorce."

The annual parenting conference is sponsored by: Texas Cooperative Extension, Lubbock County; Region 17 Education Service Center; the City of Lubbock; Lubbock Lions Club; Lubbock Independent School District; Lubbock County Dispute Resolution; National Center for Parenthood Enrichment; Department of State Health Services - Health Service Region I; the Managed Care Center for Addictive and Other Disorders; Uniting Parents; the Covenant School of Nursing; Junior League of Lubbock; Parenting Cottage; Vista Care Hospice; First Care - Southwest Health Alliance; Superior Health Plan; and Southwest Dairy Farmers.

Co-sponsors are Barnes and Noble; the Lubbock Independent School District Council of Parent-Teacher Associations; Family Guidance and Outreach Center; Firstcare; Lubbock Youth Leadership Academy; and Coronado Hospitality Service.

