PROTECTING A CHILD'S EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT WHEN PARENTS SEPARATE OR DIVORCE

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The child's development of an emotional attachment to a primary caregiver in the first six years of life is very important. A disturbance in this development can create problems in childhood, adolescence, and adult life. Behaviors fundamental to personal and interpersonal well-being are involved. Examples of these are (a) the ability to create deep and enduring love relationships, (b) the strength to tolerate the imperfect satisfaction of personal needs, (c) the attitudes and desire that lead to cooperation with others, and (d) the motivation to learn and work. The course of these processes is set in the early years of life by the quality of the attachment bond that is established then.

Divorce and separation are a reality that profoundly affects the lives of each family member. A variety of deep emotional wounds are created before, during, and after a divorce or separation. Many savage, costly battles begin when a marriage breaks up. Probably none is more destructive to all concerned than the fight for custody and/or visitation rights. Father and mother often lock horns in a bitter struggle to determine the conditions under which they can spend time with their children. Attorneys and judges enter the arena to offer their partisan advice and pronounce their judgments. Decisions that favor either the father or the mother are considered; sometimes a compromise is reached between their competing interests.

The Child's Point of View

The goal of decision making, however, should not be to favor either the mother or the father. Good decisions honor the child's developmental needs and respect the child's point of view. Wise decisions will develop and maintain the child's loving relationship with both parents. Frequently parents are unable to look beyond their own individual interests. Nevertheless, if severe problems are to be minimized, adults must give the well-being of their child importance and consideration.

The child from birth to six is by nature vulnerable. During divorce and separation, the child's emotional well-being is at considerable risk. There are important issues that should be considered.

First, it is important to ensure the child has continuous and ready access to the parent with whom the child has developed an emotional attachment. That parent is usually the mother. Studies by Ainsworth and Bell (1970), Yarrow (1963), David and Appell (1969), Isabella and Belsky (1991), and others point out patterns of behavior that build a child's secure attachment to a primary caregiver. These are (a) loving physical contact between the adult and child, (b) the caregiver's regular ability to soothe the child by holding, (c) the caregiver's sensitivity to the child's signals and the ability to time interventions in harmony with the child's rhythms, (d) the mutual delight the adult and child have by being in each other's company, and (e) the creation of an environment that permits the child to derive a sense of the consequences of his or her own actions.

When parents provide these elements to the young child, they create a foundation for an emotionally healthy life. In addition, they build into the child's personality a resilience that in future years will enable the individual to cope with life's problems and challenges successfully.

No one has contributed more to our understanding of attachment, separation, and loss in young children than has the British psychiatrist John Bowlby. In his writings he encourages

mothers to give their young children as much attention and recognition as they need. His studies and the research of others come to similar conclusions. The origins of child, adolescent, and adult problems regarding attachment to and love for another person often rest in too little responsive mothering or in mothering provided by a constantly changing variety of people (Bowlby 1969).

The Question of Weaning

A second issue of importance during separation and divorce is whether or not to wean a child from the mother's breast. Weaning has become controversial in the United States. Over the last century, the time considered proper for weaning has shortened to as little as three months. Public opinion has consistently overlooked the child's needs. Child-led weaning is commonly practiced throughout the world. Children should wean themselves. They do so, on average, at 4.2 years of age. In her book *Breastfeeding: A Guide for the Medical Profession*, Lawrence (1989) notes that comfort or nonnutritive sucking is important to young children well beyond the toddler years.

In an article from La Leche League International's *Breastfeeding Rights Packet*, Cerutti (1986) discusses the importance of breastfeeding to a child's emotional development:

> "I want to address the issue of late weaning in the USA. This is one of the few countries in the world where breastfeeding is not considered fashionable after six to twelve months of age. This is an erroneous and completely unnatural belief that originated in unfounded psychological principles of 1920.
>
> The child who nurses for two or three years is often more secure and less anxious. The 'problem' of the late weaner does not rest in the mother and baby's relationship but in our own distorted perception of the relationship of mother and child. Anything we do to interfere with that relationship in the first four years of life will be detrimental for his psychological upbringing."

In his book *Creative Parenting*, Sears (1987) also writes,

> "If your goal is to establish a comfortable maternal-infant bond, both nutritionally and emotionally then infant-led weaning is the course to follow. Weaning may then occur any time between the ages of one and four years."

When Courts Become Involved

The issue of weaning has entered the courts. If the child is to spend extended time alone with the father, weaning is considered necessary. Lawrence (1989) reviews several typical court cases.

> "Three separate cases in the United States have come to the author's attention where the father has sought custody on the basis of prolonged breastfeeding where the child nursed for comfort to about the age four. In two cases, the judge found in favor of the mother. In one case in Rochester, New York, the judge found in favor of the father when an expert witness, a local psychologist, declared that 'you have to be crazy to nurse that long.' It would seem appropriate that judges review the entire case and qualifications of the respective parents and refrain from basing their decision on personal biases and emotional testimony."

In cases of separation and divorce, parents must look beyond their own self-interests and consider the well-being of their child. An excellent example of this is for young children to be able to nurse when they so desire. To be held and to nurse are behaviors that build the attachment bond in the early years of life. Nutritive and non-nutritive nursing are both significant to the one-, two-, three-, and four-year-old child. Courts should review the developmental history of the

child to determine his or her primary attachment figure. The purpose of this careful consideration is to respect and protect the child's bond with that parent. This will ensure the child builds a positive and loving attachment to both the mother and father.

Effects of Separation

Legal decisions can have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of young children if they cause a separation of the child from the primary attachment figure. Bowlby (1969, 1973), Ainsworth and Wittig (1969), and others have conducted extensive research about the effects of separation on young children. The results of these studies confirm that some children up to six years of age may be harmed emotionally when they are separated from their primary attachment parent. These children may become anxious and distressed in response to even brief separations. Bowlby (1973) writes,

> "There have been, and still are, clinicians and others interested in children who have found it difficult to believe that accessibility or inaccessibility of an attachment figure can of itself be a crucial variable in determining whether a child (or an adult for that matter) is happy or distressed....These separations occurring when the child is young play a weighty role in the origins of many adult emotional problems."

Overnight Visitation

The issue of overnight visitation to adults other than their primary attachment figure is of great importance to young children. Such undertakings can harm the security of the attachment itself. Going to sleep at night is a transition charged with particular vulnerability and sensitivity for all young children. Wolf and Lozoff (1989) conducted research about how children make the transition from a waking to a sleeping state. Specifically, they studied the relationship between the primary caregiver's presence when a young child goes to sleep at night and that child's use of an attachment object (special toy, blanket) and thumb sucking. The authors found that children were more likely to use an attachment object when no caregiver was present during the passage to sleep. In addition, studies done in other cultures about the effects on children of nighttime child-rearing practices have shown that attachment object use was less common when children slept in the same bed or in the same room as their mothers and were breastfed longer (Gaddini & Gaddini, 1970; Hong & Townes, 1976; Litt, 1981).

A young child's love for his or her father and the father's love for his child are not at issue here. What is critical to understand is that a child's bond with the maternal attachment figure is a significantly different kind of relationship from even a close love relationship with another, including the father.

The overriding power of the child's emotional attachment to the primary attachment figure is irrational to the uninformed adult. If young children are required to spend time away from this person during the day or at night, they frequently will develop separation anxiety and sleep disturbances. These children have difficulty falling asleep or they wake up frequently throughout the night. For the young child, sleep is like a separation, and sleep disturbances are often linked with separation anxiety. As Cerutti (1986) and many others have noted, children of three, four, and five years of age can become "completely terrified if [their] mother is not around." The normal psychological regression experienced by all young children at night makes it extremely ill-advised to permit overnight separations from the maternal attachment figure. Young children should spend nighttimes with their primary attachment figure—their mothers.

Effects on the Child

Mediators, judges, and parents unfortunately often overlook the important needs of the young child and require overnight visitations before they are ready. What do young children feel

when they are forced to spend nights away from their attachment figure? What feelings are created in young children for the mother and father? What do children feel about themselves? Young children may soon come to dislike and distrust the parent who forces them to spend the night away from their primary attachment figure. Children may learn to distrust and dislike the attachment parent for not protecting them from an unwanted and painful experience. In addition, children may dislike and distrust themselves. They may see themselves as the cause of the whole predicament, including the separation and/or divorce.

Overnight visitations away from the primary caregiver can undermine and harm the security of the attachment bond itself. That bond is a young child's source of security and the foundation of the child's emotional growth. When a young child is required against his or her will to sleep overnight away from his or her primary attachment person, long-lasting emotional and interpersonal problems can result.

The behavior of a young child will show whether that child is ready and willing to spend the night away from the primary attachment figure. It is not in the interest of building the best relationship between the child and the father or mother for judges, mediators, or parents to require a child to do so before the child expresses an interest in spending the night away. Furthermore, adults should make sure that after overnight visitations begin, the child's subsequent behavior shows no adverse effects.

When children experience the separation or divorce of their parents, it is common for them to develop problems and lose behavioral gains. Children who have demonstrated control over their bowel and bladder often lose that control. Children who have weaned may need to nurse once more. Verbal children may become quiet or begin to stutter. Well-behaved children may show anger and aggression toward others and throw temper tantrums. Children who could once keep themselves out of harm's way may now get physically injured more often. Emotionally resilient children may become brittle. Children who used to think clearly and understand easily may become confused and find it hard to communicate rationally. Once happy children may become morose and depressed. Children who formerly expressed curiosity and interest in their world may become withdrawn and passive. Young children who were willful and defiant may become docile and obedient. This latter behavior change can mistakenly be seen as good. In truth, it reflects great emotional pain and threat. In the false belief that they caused the separation or divorce, young children may repress the developmentally normal and appropriate drives to become independent. They may abandon and punish their normal selves in the desperate hope that, by doing so, the parents they need and love so much will come together again. It is common for young children to manifest one or a combination of these problems in various degrees of severity in response to the separation and divorce of their parents.

It is important not to blame or punish children for these behaviors. Young children react in these ways when the stability and security of their life is violated. To prevent and/or minimize these responses, parents and other family members should create as stable and predictable an interpersonal environment for the child as possible. That environment should focus on strengthening the attachment between the child and the primary caregiver. A loving relationship with the other parent also should be maintained.

Normal Dependency Period

Of all primates, human beings have the longest period of normal developmental dependency. The child-rearing practices of both intact families and families suffering from separation and divorce often overlook this fact. The profoundly important needs of the young child are too frequently ignored or inadequately met. Decisions that have a significant impact on

the life of the young child are regularly made by parents and other adults who are not properly informed to make those decisions. When judges, mediators, and parents make decisions that give paramount consideration to the welfare of the vulnerable young child, they can limit the damage caused by divorce and separation. The effects of these decisions last a lifetime.

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