

THE SIX TASKS Facing Children of Divorce

Excerpts from the writing and research of: Judith Wallerstein

(Note: Wallerstein sees these tasks as necessary for a child to accomplish in order to get back on the track of normal developmental tasks in moving toward adulthood.)

1. Acknowledgement. In the first year after separation/divorce, the child needs to acknowledge the rupture caused by the divorce; parts of this acknowledgement include the task of separating the fantasies from reality. (This may take longer than we might expect, because most children continue to have reconciliation fantasies; to bring them back to reality is important to proceed toward the other tasks.)

Also in the first year, there is a need for the child to pass through the terror (fear of abandonment) resulting from the divorce.

2. Disengagement. As the child moves on from the denial of the situation, (s)he needs to disengage from the parental conflict and resume the childhood agenda. The child needs to stop worrying about the parents, to diminish his/her own anxiety, and to get back to being concerned with school and peer group activities.

3. Resolution of the Losses. The child needs to handle the utter loss, especially of the nuclear family, the physical presence of the other parent, of certain friends or parts of the extended family, perhaps of a neighborhood or school if a move has taken place. (Wallerstein sees that many fail to do this and suggests that it can be helped along by frequent and/ or consistent visits with the non-custodial parent, and that the nature of these visits is critical for promoting the child's adjustment. In other research, she stresses that "continued access to the non-custodial parent" only applies to a parent who is not severely disturbed, harmful to the child, or impaired in his/her parenting ability.)

The child must eventually distinguish between two notions: "he left..." and "he left because I wasn't worth loving." The latter is devastating to self-esteem, the first is acknowledging the reality.

4. Resolution of anger and self-blame. The child needs to work through his/her anger about the divorce and to move to a new perspective- that of knowing it's the parents' conflict and not "I must have been to blame." As the child begins to understand the reasons for the divorce, (s)he may move to an easier acceptance and even sometimes to forgiveness of the parents and a "reconciliation" with the parent (s)he is most angry with.

5. Acceptance of the permanence of divorce. This is a long, hard task, because, as above, most children continue to have reconciliation fantasies even as adults. Wallerstein noted that after ten years (in her study of children in Marin County), the children exhibited some yearning for the "nuclear family" in which they would have received the nurturing they wanted. (My sense is that this yearning may have to do with the myth of the perfectly loving nuclear family as depicted in the media.)

6. Formation of Hope for Relationships. As the child develops and moves into adolescence, there is a need to have realistic hopes regarding their relationships, and to learn about loving and being loved. There is some fear of marriage and/ or sexual failure before deciding that "it can be different for me than it was for my parents."

In late adolescence, Wallerstein sees that there is a turning away from the parental relationship and that the young person is critical of the parents. (This is not necessarily different from the normal development task of the adolescent.) At this age, concepts of self are favorable and there is a willingness to take a chance. There is usually a re-working of a sense of self and relationships with others, along with realizing that there are risks in all relationships.