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<http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/ballinger212.cfm>

“What Happens to the Junk Surrendered at TSA checkpoints?”;
http://www.travelong.com/Portals/102/newsletters/october_newsletter.html

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

**PART 1 OF 3 – THE LOSS OF FAMILY
TWO OF EVERY FIVE SLO COUNTY TEENS HAVE SUFFERED
BREAKUPS AT HOME. THE PAIN LEAVES SOME REELING. THE
EMOTIONAL PRICE IS STEEP: HIGHER INCIDENTS OF
DEPRESSION, DRUG USE AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS.**

Published: Sunday, December 17, 2000

by ***Jeff Ballinger***

The impacts of divorce are far-reaching, affecting teens' views of themselves, their schoolwork and their outlook on life, according to a study conducted by The Tribune of nearly 1,200 high school sophomores in San Luis Obispo County.

The Tribune undertook the 20-question survey in early November to determine the extent of difficulties and challenges that children face when their parents decide they can no longer live under the same roof.

The key findings:

- 39 percent of children surveyed said their parents are divorced or separated.
- Children in divorced or separated families are twice as prone as other children to harbor thoughts of suicide, to behave violently and to experience eating disorders.
- Nearly half of all children in divorced families indicated they had feelings of depression and had a bad temper in the years following the divorce.
- 41 percent said their grades slumped.
- 40 percent said they argued more with their parents since the split.

Many of these findings reflect national studies on the same subject conducted by various groups and university researchers in the past decade.

Julian Crocker, county superintendent of schools, said he found the survey useful because it deepens educators' understanding of teens' emotional and psychological health. It complements the Healthy Kids Survey, the study of children's health, which his office released this fall.

"Sometimes we will just, without a lot of thought, assume that every child goes home to an intact family," he said. "This puts it back up into the conscious level."

In addition, Crocker was quick to point out another way to view the results: Most students did not report experiencing harmful feelings or actions.

To be sure, not all *children of divorce* are doomed, emphasized a panel of local experts convened by The Tribune. But these findings underscore the need for parents to resolve their differences and keep the children at the forefront of their decisions and interactions.

The process panelists suggest is akin to being on an airplane, when the flight attendant gives preflight instructions on emergency situations: Parents should put on their own oxygen masks first, then strap one on their child.

"The sooner you get your place to live, stop arguing and settle down with your pattern, that will change what the child is going through," said Linda Lewis Griffith, a San Luis Obispo marriage and family counselor. "The child is just reflecting your chaos."

To gauge the depth of that turmoil, The Tribune developed a 20-question, anonymous survey, with the assistance of the panel of experts. Nearly 2,000 copies of the survey were distributed to four local high schools - Arroyo Grande, Atascadero, Paso Robles and Shandon - that agreed to give it to all sophomores, regardless of whether or not they lived in a family of divorce.

Some experts suggested sophomores would be a more open and eloquent group than middle-school students, and less jaded than seniors.

The Tribune received 1,165 surveys back from students, representing nearly half of all sophomores in the county.

Here's a closer look at the key issues.

Impact on children

The aim of the survey was to compare children in divorced families with those in intact families, in order to gain a clearer understanding of how divorce influences children and to determine some potential solutions.

Of the students surveyed, 39 percent have parents who have divorced or separated.

The Tribune survey showed the students were significantly more depressed, angry and violent than their classmates from intact families, and were nearly twice as prone to have recently used alcohol or other drugs. In addition, they experienced more slumping grades, arguments with their parents and thoughts of suicide.

Several on the panel said children grieve over a divorce much like they do to the death of a family member or close friend.

"They've lost their family, even though they may have both parents," said Lana Adams, manager of mentor services at Equal Opportunity Commission's Mentor Alliance, an agency that connects mentors with children and adults who need one. "They may still see them, but they lose their security, they lose some stability."

She said girls are particularly affected, even on a biological level that can hasten their emotional and physical development.

"Girls start looking for a male protector and thus, we have the increases in sexuality and pregnancy at early ages."

Julie Jones, a counselor at Laguna Middle School in San Luis Obispo, said the impact on boys is critical during puberty.

"That's when the boys ... desperately need a role model as they're starting to go through adolescence."

Lacking such guidance, boys often exhibit disruptive behavior that typically includes violent or risky acts.

Jones said the onset of puberty is also about the time children begin to want to change the custody arrangement because their interests evolve.

"Sometimes those schedules don't work anymore, and they become increasingly involved in activities," she said. "That time of life becomes a great upheaval (for *children of divorce*). It's a great upheaval anyway."

Impact on schools and society

As a result, schools have taken on responsibilities dealing with these problems, since that is often where they bubble over in the behavior of students.

"Teachers know when something is not right with their students," said Elizabeth Scroggins, a counselor at Monterey Road Elementary School in Atascadero. "Divorce affects children emotionally, academically and socially."

Responding is simply a matter of necessity, Scroggins said.

"Teachers also know they cannot help a student academically who is emotionally hurt."

There are group sessions for children in divorced families at county elementary and middle schools - often called Banana Splits - that primarily help students understand what divorce means and that there are other students in the same situation. At the high school level, counselors lead more in-depth group therapy sessions on a variety of topics, from issues like drug use and anger management to eating disorders and improving self-image.

"What comes up most, we do a group on," said Jeanne Neely, a teacher at Paso Robles High School who leads groups and a class on peer communication.

Although none of the high schools has a group at the moment specifically for *children of divorce*, the issue is often a topic of the other gatherings.

"(Counselor) Terry (Lassiter) and I are facilitating a girls group, and a big issue is their parents divorcing," Neely said.

Paso Robles, Atascadero and several other schools in the county also offer peer communication classes. Students trained in resolving conflict are often used as a first contact with students who refer themselves, or who are referred by teachers, parents or counselors, to the school's assistance programs.

Many of the behaviors children exhibit that attract attention are the same ones common to *children of divorce*.

Easing the alienation

Every district in the county has also begun broader-based programs designed to help children feel part of the school community and keep them from feeling lost or alienated on campus.

And in the past two years, most elementary schools in the county initiated PeaceLeaders, a schoolwide program designed to create a more peaceful and nurturing school climate. The lone exception is Paso Robles, which several years ago started Community of Caring, a district-wide program fostering connections between schools and the community with group projects on campus and in town.

Not all children doomed

The consensus from the panel convened by The Tribune is that the sobering statistics on divorce do not necessarily sentence children to long-term problems and warped self-images.

Although that ruinous fate is part of the thesis of a new best-selling book on divorce - "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce," by Judith S. Wallerstein and others - the local experts say it overstates the impact on children. Wallerstein followed a group of 131 children for 25 years who grew up in Marin County in Northern California. Typically, they had problems with relationships into adulthood, which she attributes to growing up in a divorced family.

Gail Wexler, the coordinator of supervised visitation program for Court Appointed Special Advocates, said Wallerstein's work "wasn't balanced at all."

"It was done in a very affluent community with a limited number of people, and there was no comparable study on the effects of married people (on children)."

Griffith, the family counselor, said there was some merit in Wallerstein's study, in that it shed some light on the challenges some *children of divorce* face learning how to solve problems. That happens, she said, when children learn they can rely on getting what they want by playing one parent against the other. However, she acknowledged this doesn't seem to be the case for a majority of children.

Indeed, of the four older teens interviewed at length for this series, all said they considered themselves to be flexible, able to deal with various situations and people with ease.

"That's the one good thing it taught me," said Brandon Kline, an 18-year-old freshman at Sacramento State University who graduated in June from Paso Robles High School. "Anybody who's been through divorce knows how to ... make sure things turn out for the best."

Ken Peet, the youth minister at Grace Church in San Luis Obispo, said he has long looked at the issue.

"At Cal Poly many, many years ago, my senior project was on the effects of the male child at home without a father. There is much that is missed there, and yet I think kids aren't doomed..."

"They can be taught how to respond. While mom and dad are having problems ... you're not doomed to go through the same issues. I think kids worry about that very much."

Series at a glance

Today

A first-of-its-kind survey by The Tribune of teens throughout the county reveals that divorce not only fragments families but causes major emotional and learning problems.

Monday

Thoughts of suicide, eating disorders and acts of violence are much more commonplace in teens whose parents have divorced, The Tribune's survey finds.

Tuesday

Solutions to the problems of divorce are not easily found, The Tribune's study shows. The children, their parents and experts explain that young people do not have to be doomed by divorce.

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CHILDREN OF DIVORCE –

FAMILIES 'MAKE IT WORK FOR THE KIDS' CARING PARENTS CAN HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAUMA OF A BREAKUP

Published: Sunday, December 17, 2000

by ***Jeff Ballinger***

Megan Steele can still picture the moment her parents revealed they were separating and how they gathered her and her siblings in the living room to break the news.

"I knew it was coming," Megan says now, "but I wasn't prepared for it then." The announcement was followed by a collective gasp of her siblings, along with their shock and surprise. Tears streamed down all of their faces.

Before the breakup, she considered herself to be very close to her father.

"That's the thing I remember coming to mind; I'm losing my best friend."

Steele's parents separated seven years ago when she was a sixth-grader in San Luis Obispo. The divorce did not become final until last year, but the

damage caused by the family split may last a lifetime for Megan and her four brothers and sisters.

In a country where nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, childhoods like Megan's are fast becoming the norm in America, where millions of children are caught up in families torn apart by feuding parents.

As the eldest child and self-described "Daddy's little girl," Megan felt the obligation to be the big sister whom her siblings were counting on amid the family turmoil. She said her grades slipped for a few years, but insists she got over the divorce "pretty quickly." She had to.

"I didn't really act up in school or around the house," she said. "I was helping out more because I was the oldest and it was expected."

Megan coped by forming an even closer relationship with her mother, whom she describes as her confidante. Through frank discussions with her, Megan said she has gained an understanding and a level of acceptance of why the divorce happened.

Now a freshman at Cuesta College, Megan hopes to become a preschool teacher. She still has the best relationship among her siblings with her father, but he lives in England and they see him just twice a year.

The Steele family

Megan's family has found a pace that works for them, in part because the father lives out of the country.

Janet Steele's ex-husband, who moved out seven years ago, has remarried and lives in England. She acknowledges that this long-distance arrangement can be good and bad.

There are no conflicts over custody, or much of anything else for that matter because Steele is the parent making the day-to-day decisions.

"I don't have to do holidays and weekends, and my kids aren't going back and forth from house to house," she said. "On the other hand, they don't get to see their father."

In spite of this, Steele and her five children - each spaced two years apart between the ages of 10 and 18 - believe they have found an effective way to manage the household.

The family follows a routine that is part regimentation and part laid-back. Each child is assigned a different night of the week to cook dinner for the family: Megan, Ben, 16, Gillian, 14, Hannah, 12, and Becca, 10.

Janet Steele said the routine teaches her children how to cook, to be contributing members of the family, and gives her a break during the week. She does the cleaning each night and handles the cooking on weekends.

Despite such grown-up responsibilities, the children have made their house an after-school hangout for their friends. Megan said her friends are comfortable at her house, despite the habit her mother has of enforcing the rules she makes.

"She bosses them just like she bosses us," Megan said with a smile. "All of my friends call her 'Mom.'"

The Fahey family

Sandra K. Fahey and her family have a more traditional divorce experience, in that both parents still live in the same city after their breakup six years ago.

The San Luis Obispo bankruptcy attorney said she and her husband, Dana, separated when their children were ages 1 and 4. He has remarried - coincidentally, to a woman named Sandy - but Fahey has not.

Fahey said the end was a long time in coming, so that she and her ex-husband had the opportunity to contemplate and plan how to divide their time with the children.

"I think that helped with the transition," she said, "but that isn't going to work for everyone."

In addition, the couple was able to resolve their differences. Local and national experts say this is the key to finding a workable divorce.

"That started with both of us making a committed effort that the kids came first," Fahey said. "You have to put your feelings aside. (If you don't) it makes it so much harder on the kids.

"You've got to make it work for the kids."

Fahey and her ex-husband said they have made the effort for their two children. When he remarried and bought a house, he made sure they participated in setting up their own rooms.

Fahey said the leftover bitterness she and her former husband had "was something we could deal with." They see each other frequently at their children's school and sports events.

"We're able to sit together at games," Dana Fahey said.

The couple experimented with visitation plans, starting with alternating weeks between households - one week at mom's, the next week at dad's. They're now on a rotating schedule that has each daughter spending two consecutive weeks at each house on an overlapping schedule.

One daughter spends the first and second weeks of the month at dad's, the last two weeks at mom's. The other daughter spends the second and third weeks at dad's, and the next two weeks at mom's.

"They're not having to pick up and move every week," she said.

But like the Steele family, the Fahey arrangement has some advantages many other families don't.

Aside from having a good relationship with her ex-husband, Fahey didn't face another big issue for couples - financial pressures when the split came. She counts her blessings.

"Once you start talking money, it goes downhill," she said, and the children get lost in the turmoil.

Jeff Ballinger covers K-12 education for The Tribune. Story ideas and news tips can be given to him at 781-7908 or at jballinger@thetribunenews.com.

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CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION –

'IT'S A REAL GRIEF ISSUE' FOR KIDS

Published: Sunday, December 17, 2000

by ***Jeff Ballinger***

Participants:

- Lana Adams, manager of mentor services for the Equal Opportunity Commission's Mentor Alliance. ? Lara Battles, a marriage and family counselor from Arroyo Grande;
- Linda Lewis Griffith, a marriage and family counselor from San Luis Obispo;
- Julie Jones, seventh-grade counselor at Laguna Middle School in San Luis Obispo;
- Ken Peet, youth minister of Grace Church in San Luis Obispo;
- Joanne Smith, clinical program director for Big Brothers Big Sisters;
- Gail Wexler, coordinator of supervised visitation program for Court Appointed Special Advocates.

Q: What are you seeing as the impact of divorce on children?

Adams: It's a real grief issue for them. They've lost their family, even though they may have both parents - and they may still see them. They lose their security. They lose some stability. There's always some kind of abandonment issues that go with that. With a lot of these families there are substance-abuse issues or other kinds of problems ... a lot of the kids in mentoring are from single-parent families, although not all ... I think for most of us, even when you have two parents in a family, it's pretty tough. But when you're the primary caregiver that becomes very difficult, and that's on top of all those other issues of parents fighting.

We have a lot of research now that shows that girls actually go through biochemical changes when dad leaves ... at a biological level, girls start looking for a male protector and thus we have increases in sexuality and pregnancy at early ages.

Q: Is there a typical manifestation on middle-school-age kids?

Jones: One of the things is that their (school) work starts to suffer. First of all, they're going from one or two classes maybe in elementary school to seven teachers (in middle school). So, they have all these things to organize with all this homework and different teachers, and then also they may have to organize going to a different parent's home, and they have these PE clothes that have to get washed every week. Their whole life becomes much more entangled and difficult.

Griffith: It's like every day is moving day. Imagine every day you're in a different place, or every two days you're in a different place. By the time they get to (middle school) they don't want to go every three days here and there, and the parents have to be flexible and be able to say now "we have to rethink this."

Smith: I think one of the most important things that parents need to be able to provide to their kids, as they're going through a divorce, is good communication between the two of them. I think that the parents have to rise above their dislike for each other and work toward the needs of the child. Some of the manifestations that we see in these children ? there's a lot of pain, a lot of confusion ? you lose belief in the world around you when your world is shaken up like this. ? They start using drugs; they start using alcohol; they do become sexual at an early age. We know all of these.

Battles: I think we have to get real about what actually happens in divorce so that we can begin to provide thoughtful guidance and acceptance of the consequences of our behavior on our children, or on our whole culture. Without that, we are going to be gravely in error ...

What we're looking at is a culture that in some ways looks as if it is having catastrophic war consequences. ... It's like you're trying to build a new culture on plate tectonics that are constantly shifting. ... You get different kinds of values accepted as normal, and I think the jury is out as to whether that normalization is positive for our culture.

Q: So how do you see that when you get a 15-year-old for counseling?

Battles: I see a lot of depression. I think kids really hurt, but hurt is normalized, so they don't know that hurt isn't supposed to be happening. ... What I see also are huge holes between the parents' world and the kids' world.

Q: Can you counsel for trust? If you saw a child or a parent, is there something you do?

Griffith: My advice to the parents is the sooner you get your place to live, stop arguing, settle down with your pattern ... that will change what the child is going through. The child is just reflecting your chaos. That doesn't mean that I want you to get married next year, but the sooner you guys get stabilized, that will be better for the child.

(You need) to show the child that you're both going to be there, and you're both going to be problem-solving together, but unfortunately that often doesn't happen ... the divorce isn't sometimes as difficult as the acrimony that follows. ... The children need to love and like both parents ... and when there's that ongoing rift , ... that just shreds them.

Jones: And sometimes it's not really overt. It's a subtleness that is constant ? with how the parent feels about the other parent.

Smith: It's what's not said.

Jones: And they think they're doing such a great job of not saying (nasty) things about the other one and yet it's just little things ? little tensions ? a little tiny dig here and a little tiny dig there.

Peet: I see how (kids) are trying to deal with those things - through anger, blaming themselves. I don't think kids, for the most part, are really the cause of divorce, nor can they prevent it, and yet they will take it a lot on their own shoulders. They are going, "Oh, what if I didn't do this?" ... (Parents) have an awful lot to say with how their kids are going to respond and how they're going to deal with it. And how well it's going to go.

Wexler: Ideally it would be great to go see a psychologist or somebody for the parents to talk to and work this out. I think it's probably more affluent

parents that will do this, and then there's the rest of the parents who would never have the resources or maybe not even think about it to approach that.

Adams: Another issue is the way kids can manipulate the parents. You know, "Dad lets me stay out until 2 a.m. Why do you have my curfew set at 10?" If you can't have that consistency with them, then they're going to be stretching that to the max.

Peet: There are going to be sides taken. I see - on the parents' end - using the kids. You know, wanting to get info as they're going through the proceedings. ... They see even their own parent trying to use them to get info against dad to be used in court? These are very adult issues and feelings and emotions that they're having to work with. ... At Poly, many, many years ago, my senior project was on the effects of the male child at home without a father. There is much that is missed there and yet I think kids aren't doomed. ... they can be taught how to respond. While mom and dad are having problems, you know, you're not doomed to go through the same issues, and I think kids worry about that very much. "I don't want to get married. I don't want this to happen to me." So they need to be encouraged and affirmed and directed.

Q: So when you're dealing with a child who says, "I don't know what to do with my anger," what do you tell the child?

Peet: We have to go through that process of empathizing with them first of all. It's understandable that you're angry at mom and dad, but then we have to affirm for them who they are, that it's OK. ... And help them understand that really, again, they aren't the cause, but they gotta deal with it and then direct them.

Q: What about the new book ("The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study" by Judith S. Wallerstein) that suggests it's better for couples not to divorce regardless of the level of fighting between them, because as soon as they divorce they doom their children to a life of bad relationships?

Jones: Like fighting doesn't do that?

Wexler: It was done in a very affluent community (in Marin County) with a limited number of people and there was no comparable study on the effects

of married (couples). ? It wasn't balanced at all. ... There are many experts in the field who totally disagree.

Griffith: You don't stop having a relationship with that person when you divorce. ... One of the things that I see that I don't see recognized very often with divorces, is when kids are going back between two households, they very seldom learn how to solve problems. Because, if I don't solve it with you, then I can go with dad and if I don't get along with dad then I can come back with mom and there's this sense of "OK, I don't have to resolve it"... instead of "we've got to figure this out." ... There's always an easy way out.

Jones: My feeling is if someone has to lose in this divorce, it ought to be one of the adults and not the child. So, when the child is made to do a week here and a week there ... I've seen a couple of instances where it has worked, but not many. Or even worse, they go in the middle of the week.

A couple of weeks ago I had a little girl come to me because she was supposed to switch to dad's that night and didn't want to go and wanted me to talk to dad. I can't do that, and I had to talk to her about how that wasn't something I could do. ... And so what happened is I was able to call dad and sit down and ask the little girl to talk ... tell your dad why you don't want to go. ... It was really sad, because what she talked about was her bedroom. "I want to be in my bedroom in mom's house, because that's where my stuffed animals are." She had her own bedroom (at the father's house), but to her that wasn't her room for some reason. ... I think every child deserves one home.

Q: But then educationally for that young lady that you're using as an example, how does that situation result in problems for her education?

Jones: Well, this one particular little girl is failing a lot of classes and she has trouble organizationally anyway, so this really puts pressure on her ... just not being able to get her homework done at one place or the other, and just not being able to get the help ... she needs. ? Where does the tutor go? Where does she stay? ? It's just ? chaos.

Adams: I think a lot of divorcing parents don't see how much chaos they're in. I think that's part of why they don't kind of neutralize it ... you're just always dealing at this high level that you don't even really consciously know what it's about until you make that decision and it's like ah ? OK ... now I can think.

Q: So kids are facing abandonment and anger displacement, depression, lack of trust. Are those the issues, if you had to narrow it down?

Jones: I think the custody issue is a huge issue.

Adams: I don't know if it's one of the top three, but the longer-range one is this conflict resolution and (parents') inability to learn that, because that's going to affect their lives and that will determine whether or not they have a good relationship later on.

Griffith: Conflict resolution, problem-solving.

Q: Are there things in the court that should change?

Jones: I think they should require all parents to take a divorced parenting class.

All agree

Griffith: Wouldn't that be terrific to have mandatory pre-divorce counseling?

Adams: I work with the youth task force in Atascadero, and this has come up over and over and I think it does in other communities: If we could get in high school this type of "Life Skills" class for students so they're learning. Because we can teach these parents, but unless we teach the kids that are going to be the future parents, personally, I think that's the key to prevention. We need to start dealing with these kids teaching them how to be parents, so they're learning conflict resolution and problem-solving and the importance of or the impact of divorce on kids.

Jones: But they're elective.

Adams: But they should be mandatory.

Jones: They should be. I think they should be a graduation requirement - a life skills class and parenting class in high schools.

Battles: You know I think that was the intent of the health class, but obviously they've been watered down to a degree. I think we would also have to get past the school boards' hysteria about presenting materials that involve sexuality, and that's just a reality in our community and every other

community in California. The school board does not want to be held responsible for teaching sexuality in the schools 'cause they're gonna get lynched.

If you need help

A host of organizations in San Luis Obispo County offer help to families dealing with emotional problems and other issues caused by divorce. Here is a listing of some of the key groups:

- Hotline of San Luis Obispo County Inc., 549-8989 or 1-800-549-8989 (available 24 hours). Offers variety of telephone services, including crisis intervention, support and referrals. Also has directory of local services and support groups available at the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce.
- Family Court Services, 781-5423. Offers mediation services to establish parenting plans for parents who live apart but have children together and provides court-mandated parenting class for divorcing parents.
- Family Intervention Program, 781-3535. Provides crisis counseling for teens and their families at low-to-no cost, primarily to preserve and maintain family relationships.
- Parent Support Center, 781-1783 or 1-800-834-3002, ext. 1781. Offers counseling, support groups and education.
- Parenting and Therapeutic Home Services, California Department of Social Services, 781-1781 or 1-800-834-3002. Countywide in-home parent education and family services for families experiencing high levels of stress.
- Pepper Tree Counseling Services, 545-9449 (24-hour answering service available). Offers psychological evaluations and counseling for individuals, families, couples and groups.
- San Luis Obispo County Mental Health, 781-4700, 461-6060 or 473-7060. Offers specialized youth and family therapy, outreach and case management in cooperation with variety of other agencies.
- Willow Creek Youth and Family Center, 549-6728, 237-4457 or 474-9168. Nonprofit counseling center for individual, family and group therapy.

For additional resources, contact your child's school counselor, your church, or consult a telephone directory.

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CHILDREN OF DIVORCE – DAY TWO

**A HURT THAT CUTS DEEP
WHILE DIVORCE SEEMS COMMONPLACE IN TODAY'S
SOCIETY, TEENS STRUGGLE TO MAKE SENSE OF A VERY
PERSONAL FAMILY TRAUMA. BAD ATTITUDES GIVE WAY TO
SOMETIMES LIFE-THREATENING BEHAVIORS.**

Published: Monday, December 18, 2000

by ***Jeff Ballinger***

Charity West said her parents' divorce nearly a decade ago jarred the course of her life.

"My grades plummeted," she said. "I lost a lot of self-confidence. I was short. I had crooked teeth. Then I got braces. I became really depressed." When she was a high school freshman, West said, she swallowed an entire bottle of pain killers amid the stress caused by the family split. "I tried to OD (overdose) on Advil."

Now 19 and a sophomore journalism student at Cal Poly, she believes she acted more out of stupidity than desperation. "I don't think I was trying to kill myself."

But the anguish West experienced is common for children whose parents' marriage ends.

Children of divorced parents were twice as likely to harbor thoughts of suicide than children who live in intact, or traditional, families, according to The Tribune's survey of nearly 1,165 high school sophomores in San Luis Obispo County.

Twice as many children of divorced parents said they had recently engaged in violent behavior (20 percent) and experienced an eating disorder (11 percent). These children also reported - by about 50 percent more than kids in intact families - they had suffered from depression (46 percent), a bad temper (45 percent), and used alcohol or other drugs (31 percent).

In any family, local experts say, divorce can be a traumatic experience in which children suffer intense pain for years.

How long the agony endures and how it affects them as adults is a matter debated by therapists nationwide, but local teens say the experience profoundly altered their lives, especially in the first few years after the divorce.

"Divorce is really a grief issue that we just don't really address," said Lana Adams, manager of mentor services at the Equal Opportunity Commission's Mentor Alliance. "Divorce is so common now, and we don't think much of it. But for kids that I've worked with, it's a real grief issue for them."

West said she was a happy person on the outside for others to see when she was a student in Atascadero schools.

"Inside, that wasn't remotely me."

West was angry with her mother and made her father's life "hell in his relationships. His love life was nil because of me. I hated all his girlfriends and was very vocal about it."

This from a young woman who now looks back on the turmoil and calls her parents supportive of her. (Both back her participation in this series.) She found help attending group counseling sessions at Atascadero High School and from a private therapist.

"We were able to stand back and look at our problems and see what caused me to feel bad," she said.

West considers herself a well-adjusted person whose experiences helped shape the positive person she is today. She works full time as an ambassador for the Equal Opportunity Commission's Mentor Alliance, recruiting mentors for children.

Recurring patterns

Pedro Vazquez said he faced difficulties in every facet of his life after his parents separated six years ago.

"Major, major problems," said the 17-year-old senior at Paso Robles High School. "I kind of like didn't care. I had a real negative attitude toward everybody else. I didn't care what anybody else said."

Like many children, Pedro said he harbored a lot of anger about his parents' breakup, and he felt helpless. "I didn't feel like my parents were proud of me. I thought they were too busy dealing with the divorce."

Growing up amid such turmoil, Pedro said he began drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana and hanging out with a group of friends prone to delinquent behavior.

While they had no scrapes with the law, he said he earned a reputation as someone who could take care of himself in a fight.

Pedro lives with his mother, who consented to his being quoted in this series.

Brandon Kline, an 18-year-old college freshman and graduate from Paso Robles High School, has a lingering reaction to his parents' divorce 10 years ago. In a telephone interview from his dorm room at Sacramento State, the former senior class president said he has a difficult time explaining how he felt at the time.

"I didn't feel normal," he said. "I don't think I've felt normal since then."

Kline said he felt caught in the middle for a few years, while his parents initially argued over just about everything.

"My parents couldn't agree on anything," he said, "so things were really rough."

If you need help

A host of organizations in San Luis Obispo County offer help to families dealing with emotional problems and other issues caused by divorce. Here is a listing of some of the key groups:

- Hotline of San Luis Obispo County Inc., 549-8989 or 1-800-549-8989 (available 24 hours). Offers variety of telephone services, including crisis intervention, support and referrals. Also has directory of local services and support groups available at the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce.
- Institute for the Family, 489-1005. Low-cost (on a sliding scale) counseling for couples and families. Services available in Grover Beach, San Luis Obispo and Atascadero.
- Big Brothers-Big Sisters of San Luis Obispo County, 781-3226. Adult role models for children ages 6-16 living in single-parent households.
- Drug and Alcohol Services of San Luis Obispo County, 781-4753, 473-7080, or 461-6080. Offers outpatient treatment for adults, adolescents and children with problems related to use/abuse of alcohol and other drugs.
- Friday Night Live, 781-4289. An alcohol and drug-prevention program that operates as a club on most county high school campuses, sponsoring drug-free events.
- Grizzly Youth Academy, 782-6880 or 1-800-926-0643. A 22-week program - sponsored by the National Guard and the County Office of Education - for teens having trouble in school and life, with an emphasis on education and life skills.

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CHILDREN OF DIVORCE –

HOUSE WARS: CUSTODY WOES WORSEN THE PAIN

Published: Monday, December 18, 2000

by ***Jeff Ballinger***

The pain that children experience after their parents divorce is inevitable, local experts say, but it doesn't have to be inescapable.

There are considerable variations in individual children, but local counselors and therapists say how parents communicate with each other and resolve custody of their children go a long way toward determining how well the children handle the disruption. Lana Adams, manager of Mentor Services at the Equal Opportunity Commission's Mentor Alliance, said parents too often get caught up in their own squabbling and lose track of their children's needs. Some use their children, intentionally or otherwise, to find out information about their spouses or even to get back at them.

"Parents need to understand that they are divorcing each other and they shouldn't be divorcing that child," she said.

Even well-intentioned parents mindful of this can have children who suffer, said Ken Peet, a youth minister at Grace Church in San Luis Obispo.

"I don't think kids, for the most part, are really the cause of divorce, nor can they prevent it," Peet said. "And yet they will take a lot on their own shoulders."

Adams and Peet were among seven local professionals, all who work with children, who participated in a round-table discussion at The Tribune on divorce and its impact on children. They identified good communication as a key to minimizing the confusion and sorrow children encounter when mom and dad can no longer live in the same house.

More than one expert has likened divorce to the death of a close family member.

"Divorce is really a grief issue that we just don't really address," Adams said. "Divorce is so common now, and we don't think much of it, but for kids that I've worked with, it's a real grief issue for them."

Lara Battles, an Arroyo Grande marriage and family counselor, compared what children go through in a divorce to post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition more commonly seen in soldiers.

The comments of several teens interviewed during the course of this series support these comparisons. They said they only began to understand and forgive their parents with the passage of time and their own growing up. Often therapy and the ear of a good friend helped, too.

Custody arrangements

Families weren't designed to split time between households, so local experts say there is no perfect custody arrangement.

There are many ways that parents, courts and mediators decide how to share the children's time. In virtually all forms, it is the children who do the packing up and moving one or more times a week.

Too often, the arrangements seem like they are decided with the parents' wishes in mind, said Julie Jones, a counselor for seventh-grade students at Laguna Middle School in San Luis Obispo.

"One of the reasons parents want to do it (switching households) is they want to counteract the other," she said. "They don't have any trust in the other parent."

Not surprisingly, that can have adverse effects on the children.

Charity West, a 19-year-old journalism student at Cal Poly, said her family's custody arrangement, which forced her to go back and forth each week between her mother's and father's homes, was draining.

"It's not the best thing, but we couldn't think of anything better," she said. "I wanted time with my father; I wanted time with my mother."

West was torn between the allegiances.

"You have your favorite clothes that you take back and forth with you," she said. "One house always feels more like home. I always felt bad about that. You're always worried about your parents' feelings. That was a huge concern of mine."

Sandra K. Fahey, a San Luis Obispo bankruptcy attorney, may have found a passage through the maze of emotions laid bare by divorce.

Fahey said she and her ex-husband, Dana, managed to set aside their own issues with each other for the sake of their children after divorcing six years ago. Granted, she acknowledges she has the benefit of a good-paying job and an ex-husband who lives in town and whom she trusts.

This made it easier to go through the divorce process and come out the other side with few scars. "I think that helped with the transition, but that isn't going to work with everyone," she said.

Troubling statistics

Battles believes "most parents at least make a stab at trying to be reasonably accommodating for their children. There certainly are a few who are just hideous about the custody stuff."

That is reflected in one of the questions on The Tribune survey of 1,165 local high school sophomores. In response to how satisfied they are with the custody arrangement, 38 percent described it as very satisfactory or excellent, while 18 percent said it was very unsatisfactory or unbearable.

Battles said these statistics don't necessarily contradict teens' responses to a question about how they felt after their parents divorced. Far more *children of divorce* than children in intact families reported violent behavior, thoughts of suicide, use of alcohol and other drugs and other negative thoughts and actions.

So, teens said they're satisfied with custody but report plenty of adverse reactions to divorce.

"Perhaps they don't know what to compare it to," suggested Linda Lewis Griffith, a San Luis Obispo marriage and family counselor. "But if overall depression is that high, I'm not sure they're all that pleased with their living arrangements."

Battles believes some teens are in denial about sensitive family issues and minimize the severity of their situations. As a result, they may act out the feelings they're suppressing.

On the positive side, teens often feel less stress after the divorce.

"The grief of the family's pulling apart is often not nearly as severe as was the struggle that preceded it," she said.

What to look for

All children have stress, which manifests itself in various ways. Here are some things for divorcing parents to look out for, according to researchers Janet Clark and Art Schneider from their report, "Focus on Kids: The Effects of Divorce on Children":

Among babies:

- Loss of appetite
- Upset stomach

Among toddlers:

- More crying, clinging
- Problems sleeping
- Regression to infant behaviors
- May withdraw, bite or be irritable

Among preschoolers:

Pleasant and unpleasant fantasies

- May be accident prone
- May become aggressive and angry toward parent he/she lives with
- May have more nightmares
- Experiences feelings of grief because of sudden absence of parent
- Early elementary:
- Ignores school and friendships
- Expresses worries about the future
- Fears nobody will be there to pick him/her up from school
- Complains of headaches or stomach aches
- Has trouble sleeping
- Tries to recreate "what was"
- Experiences loss of appetite, sleep problems, diarrhea, urinary frequency

Preteens and adolescents:

- Tries to take advantage of parents' low energy and high stress levels
- Tries to take control over family
- Shows extreme behavior (good and bad)

- Becomes moralistic or becomes involved in high-risk behaviors (drugs, shoplifting, skipping school)
- Tries to be an "angel" to bring the family back together
- Tries to cut one or both parents out of her/his life
- Worries about financial matters

The Tribune survey

In concert with a panel of local education, mental health and family counseling professionals, The Tribune developed a survey that asked high school sophomores how their parents' divorce affected their self-esteem, classwork and social relationships. Four high schools - Arroyo Grande, Atascadero, Paso Robles and Shandon - participated; of the 2,000 surveys handed out, 1,165 were completed anonymously by students. The Tribune then used a computer software program to analyze the data and draw conclusions. The resulting database is a first of its kind for San Luis Obispo County.

On the Web

Read today's coverage at www.thetribunenews.com. E-mail comments to jballinger@thetribunenews.com.

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CHILDREN OF DIVORCE – DAY THREE

PAIN FADES WITH TIME

PERHAPS THE BEST WAY PARENTS CAN EASE THE HURT THEIR TEENS FEEL IN THE WAKE OF A BREAKUP, EXPERTS SAY, IS BY BEING GOOD LISTENERS AND SPENDING QUALITY TIME WITH THEIR CHILDREN.

Published: Tuesday, December 19, 2000

by *Jeff Ballinger* and Richard Jackoway

The adage that time heals all wounds may be the only common salve for *children of divorce*.

Discussions with those children, their parents and counselors, as well as a review of national research into the issue, show no panacea for the pain brought on when marriages end. In fact, when asked in a Tribune survey of 1,200 high school sophomores throughout the county what could have made the transition easier for them, more than half who answered wrote the same one word: Nothing.

Painful, personal experience

That doesn't mean, however, that such children are doomed to a life of despair. Some even point to the divorce as the thing that forced them to mature, albeit more quickly than they wanted.

"It really helped me to grow up and to become an adult," said Charity West, a 19-year-old Cal Poly student whose Atascadero parents divorced nine years ago. "I'm better able to handle conflicting situations and problems that arise."

Likewise for Brandon Kline, 18, and Pedro Vazquez, 17, of Paso Robles, and 18-year-old Megan Steele of San Luis Obispo.

"You're just able to get used to the idea, after a while," Megan said.

"I got older," Pedro said.

Brandon's family gets along much better now 10 years after the divorce, as there are no more arguments over money or custody issues.

For others, personal growth came from tragedy. As Pedro hit his teens, a few years after his parents' separation, he saw one friend in the "wrong crowd" murdered and another charged with committing murder.

"Things like that started opening my eyes," he said, acknowledging that the process took another few years.

Taking a helping hand

Most said they were helped, in varying degrees, by group therapy programs that exist in most schools in San Luis Obispo County. Banana Splits groups are found in most elementary and middle schools, and help teach children about what divorce is and show them they aren't alone.

In high school, groups are typically organized around issues such as anger management, depression, and use of alcohol and other drugs. However, divorce is a common topic, as these groups' central issues are often symptoms of children struggling with family upheaval common in divorce.

Charity said she attended a helpful peer counseling group when she was a student at Atascadero High School.

"You know you're not the only one going through it," she said. "Being in a group, I was able to realize that."

The group also helped Charity understand "the divorce wasn't because of me ... and didn't have to ruin my life."

All the teens also had someone close to them they could confide in and generally spoke admiringly of at least one of their parents. Similarly, The Tribune's survey of high school sophomores found that 90 percent had a close family member or friend they could trust to help them through difficult situations.

For Megan Steele, that person was her mother, Janet.

"She was really open with me," Megan said. "She's my best friend. I tell her 98 percent of what goes on in my life."

Pedro's confidante was his former girlfriend of four years, who he said, helped keep him in line with pointed criticism. He said she was also struggling with a divorce in her family, and he learned from her experiences.

"It made me realize what I had," he said. "If I saw something she did to make it better, I picked up on that."

A silver lining

Brandon said his relationship with his family is much improved, and that the experience has taught him to be a good problem solver and to have a positive attitude.

"That's the one good thing it taught me. Anybody who's been through divorce knows how to make sure things turn out for the best."

That's what the Fahey and Steele families hope they've accomplished.

Janet Steele has tried to be open and honest with her children and not to speak ill of their father.

"I try to assure them they had nothing to do with the divorce," she said. "It was between (us)."

Janet Steele has also tried to structure daily family life so her five children learn responsibility for their actions. Each one has a different weeknight to cook dinner for the family, and they do their own homework without help from mom.

"I've tried to make my kids responsible and accountable and let them know you have control over what comes out of your mouth. The divorce is no excuse for bad behavior."

Sandra K. Fahey, a San Luis Obispo bankruptcy lawyer, also believes her two children have "learned some flexibility skills."

Fahey strongly urges parents, especially those of preteens, to not force children to decide which parent they want to live with most. It's too big a decision to expect children to make, and it will leave them feeling guilty about not picking the other parent, she said.

Most importantly, she said, she and her ex-husband set aside their negative feelings about each other.

"That started with both of us making a committed effort that the kids came first."

Some of the teens interviewed said the process of divorce has made them better, more complete individuals.

"In the end, when I look back on it now, it was the best thing that could have happened," said West. "It has made me who I am."

Vazquez had a similar observation.

"I wouldn't change anything," he said, "because everything that has happened has led up to the present day."

Good parenting skills

A review of national studies shows little consensus about what policies or programs can aid divorcing families.

So what works? It sounds like pop psychology, but the experts agree that seemingly simple maxims of good parenting - listening to your children, consistency, spending quality time - are even more important for divorcing couples.

The problem is that parents often find themselves so entangled in the emotional and legal consequences of divorce that they don't focus on the impact their breakup is having on their children.

To respond to such a reality, the San Luis Obispo County Family Court Services requires that parents attend a three-and-a-half-hour class called "Children: The Challenge of Divorce," before divorces are finalized.

Supervisor Larry Helm said parents often bemoan having to take the class but typically leave feeling happy they did.

"The court wants parents to continue their parental relationship with each other and continue to have the rights of being parents, as well as taking on the responsibility of being parents," he said.

The class covers a wide variety of topics, including children's rights, common reactions by children and parents to divorce, tips on how to talk to *children* about *divorce*, how to make parenting plans, and strategies to resolve conflicts.

Dana Fahey said the class was helpful when he and his ex-wife went through it several years ago. He said the class presented a common-sense approach that stressed setting their own differences aside and putting the children's needs first.

"It was reinforcing what we already knew," Fahey said.

Maria Jongeling, director of the Family Renewal Center in Paso Robles, encourages such sessions but argues they don't go far enough.

"Going through divorce is a painful process. For children, conflict-ridden situations and anger between divorced parents create devastating effects," Jongeling said. "A one-evening parenting session, which I hear is very good, is basically just not enough."

Jongeling leads Putting Children First sessions, primarily for divorcing parents, on Monday nights in which she tries to connect parents with the needs of their children.

She has a theory on why there are so few comprehensive programs dealing with divorced parents.

"It is so difficult to work with separating or divorced parents because the conflict is so intense that few therapists dare to go there. It is easier with couples that want to make things work," she said. "These cases are very complicated legally and emotionally, and the children are losing in the end. Frankly that breaks my heart."

Not all is lost

There is some good news for families of divorce.

Over time, children from such families are not markedly worse off than children in "traditional families," particularly if those two-parent families are dysfunctional.

Researcher Robert Hughes of Ohio State University explains it this way: "Most children in divorced families do not need help, but more children in this group than in intact families are likely to need help. This is a complicated message for all of us to deliver, and it is why researchers, practitioners and the media often err on the side of one or the other of these two types of findings."

And they echo the children's belief in healing and confidants.

Hughes and others see time as a major factor in resolving the grief and anger that come with divorce.

Healing with help

"Humans heal from horrible situations over time. Healing takes time, energy and commitment to yourself and to your children," Hughes said. "Making a decision to start a new beginning comes immediately for some. For others, it happens only after you have had time to resolve your emotional and psychological pain."

Joanne Smith, a clinical program director for the local Big Brothers-Big Sisters organization, said teens need people to talk to and spend time with.

"We need more mentors," she said. "We need more adults who are willing to give their time." To these kids, that's the most important thing, Jones said.

"They just want somebody to hang around with who will be there consistently for them, who will show up when they tell them that they'll show up."

If high school counselors and others who work with students had more money, they would expand what they have for students and parents and try and engage the community in collaborative efforts.

Jeanne Neely, a peer communication teacher who leads group sessions for students at Paso Robles High School, said she'd like to see more money spent on programs for students and parents.

"We'd contract out with private therapists," she said. "They'd get true interventions, with follow-up. It would be more thorough and broad-based. Here we're running around putting Band-Aids on kids."

Neely would like to see more parenting classes and programs to bring more parents on campus. In an ideal world, "I'd have parents be less busy and be here more with their kids."

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