

Seeing your Kids on Christmas

When the holidays happen I am reminded of the "trauma" some children experience by the forced separation from one parent for an indeterminate period of time. Celebration of holidays with family members is one way that families, even ones who are separated because of divorce, build relationships, observe traditions and shape a sense of family. My own child was a product of divorce since age 2. For 12 years every Christmas we went to the airport and he became an "unaccompanied minor". The experience of separation for the parents is difficult as well. We try to make the best of it, just as the child does. The difference between the adults and the children in this experience of visitation is that as adults we come to know the child and hope to relate through what we, as adults want to provide as an experience. We want it to be attractive (fun) for the child and hopefully memorable, and one, which the child will choose to return to, we hope. This, of course, is depending on what our circumstances are in the relationship.

As parents we want to have some modicum of control because we have the responsibility for our offspring even when we are not with them. The first time I put my 4-year-old son on an airplane by himself, I envisioned his umbilical cord dragging out of my womb and being stretched as a string by a highflying kite. I did not rejoice. Nor could I dwell on the physicalness of the pain. Instead, I distracted myself with my pre-mother, non-mother self – the one who could take long baths, sleep late, eat with conversation – have other, uninterrupted relationships with friends and with work and play. I did not consider how it felt to be 4 years old on a jet plane for the first time without either parent. Could this have been my child's first traumatic stress?

We know that children are the product of temperament, environment, genetic structure, health, education and welfare. Trauma is relative. Whether it is a war torn country or war in the courts between parents, it affects the health and welfare of children nonetheless. The minute parents divorce, hope begins to fade like cut flowers who lose their source of life. Children lose the light that was in their eyes. Up to the age of 8 they may develop somatic symptoms (bed wetting, poor eating habits, stomach and headaches) as well as behavioral drama that gets some result – otherwise it doesn't continue. Whether trauma is abuse, hospitalization, the death of a parent or sibling, or divorce – it changes kids. It is easy; if you are the parent with the child, to blame the symptoms on the other visiting parent. If

you question the child enough to satisfy your curiosity about what really happened at the visitation, the child will believe you do not trust him or her or that he must betray the other parent to satisfy you.

When I was a kid we played games like "Baby in the Middle". It was fun if you weren't the baby or it didn't last too long. Otherwise it was destructive teasing. Teasing makes smaller younger children feel less loved and protected. It is an easy diversion for older siblings who need to feel more powerful because of loss and frustration. Everyone loses in divorce but parents are very distracted by the huge change in their own health and welfare. They have little time to think about their children's trauma without becoming sorrowfully mired or powerfully angry.

Courts and attorneys get involved and the health and welfare of the community reigns down of the family.

Sometime ago I was asked by a divorcing father – "What is the most important thing that children need from their parents to be mentally healthy?"

I was impressed that he chose the word healthy instead of happy.

"The most important thing that kids need," I said, "is to see their parents loving and respecting each other."

"What is the next most important thing? ", he said.

"Seeing them" I replied.

We live in an incredibly busy and scary world. We have continuous opportunities to be distracted away from relationship. Just sleeping in the same home together can foster relationship or it can detract from being known if everyone is encouraged to interact in another direction. Parents love to buy toys for their children so the children can look happy and be distracted by the toys. I'm sorry, but even an interactive toy like a Wii or a DSI has no soul. Physical touch, face-to-face interaction with a story or game will at least create eye contact if not a shared floor, table, or sofa space. Lap sitting and story telling provide a comfort as the parent's voice resonates with breathing as the parent shares a book with

their child(ren).

Having visitation often means sacrificing time and money to journey with the child, experience events with the child, converse with the child, and listen to the child. It is a huge temptation to ask questions or talk about the other parent. In a solid household kids can do this. They may ask one parent about the other parent's motive. The parents may turf a problem or a question to the other parent through the child – "Go ask your mom –". This doesn't happen so much during visitation. The child is the most familiar with the parent that is the most consistent and the one he spends the most time with. Being a baby in the middle, the child wants to keep both parents happy and betray neither. It is necessary for survival. Once the survival mentality surfaces, the child, by definition is feeling insecure and no longer experiences secure attachment. Distrust of someone or something has entered their life. The Princess has touched the spinning wheel. The Squire is threatened by the dragon and brandishes the shield and sword. Now both parents have new minefields to navigate.

I meet children everyday that have such disastrous visitation schedules they have no permanent home. They travel equally between households from an early age and have some difficulty making sense of their worlds. Because of poor object relations and individuation as infants and toddlers, they become crippled with poor speech and language skills as well as attachment disordered behavior.

So what can we do? Is there an answer? I think parents need to have a long-term plan. When possible, they need to share the same space with the child in healthy productive ways. Fear and anger in the parents prevent this. For some reason two people who planted and nurtured a seed together continue to disappoint each other. Their feelings are hurt; one or both believe they cannot live with the humiliation of rejection. Talk is good for this. Counseling is good for this. Counseling is good even if it means getting the screaming done before being around the kids. Talk about rules, try to be consistent. Don't allow the child to be in the middle - keep them out of the adult hierarchy. Please do not sacrifice them as pawns just to kill the queen or put the king in checkmate.

Consider each other as teammates on a workforce. Imagine you are in the business of

bringing this baby into adulthood with some sense of security. Find a way to communicate in unemotional ways that make sense. – e-mail, and texting are both helpful. Take the high road. You slept with this person – naked. Be kind. The frustration only lasts the child's lifetime but if the relationships improve they become less frustrating and the children become healthier.

Enjoy visitation. It will never be long enough. You will not get to accomplish everything you planned. Make eye contact, not with angry eyebrows and grumpy countenance but with kindness, compassion and good listening skills. Learn love languages. (see Chapman1995) This child will always be your child; you will always be the parent. The circumstances created for your child are your combined responsibility.