

The Single-Parent Family*

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I N discussing the single-parent family, while some of my comments deal with syndromes existing in all single-parent families in our Western culture, I am addressing myself in particular to the Jewish lower- and middle-class family in our society, thus omitting some of the singularities of families of Black, Puerto Rican and other "minority" groups. Similarly, I will not deal with the unwed mother although recent statistics have shown a slight increase in their numbers. The single-parent family to be discussed in this article is the family wherein one of the parents lives separately due to divorce or permanent separation, or wherein a parent is missing altogether due to death.

As a result of an external event, be it divorce or death of one parent, the other parent is left in the position of carrying the daily responsibility for the children. This includes the providing of nurture (emotional and physical) and leadership (decision-making and discipline) at least on a day-to-day basis. In the event of death, the total responsibility is left for the surviving parent, whereas when the parents are divorced or separated, the partial but heavier responsibility lies on the parent who is the caretaker of the children. While there are some elements common to both types of families, such as the fact that the remaining parent has both quantitatively as well as qualitatively a greater responsibility for the raising of the children, there are great differences between families where a divorce occurred and a family where a parent

has died.

These differences have to do with the reality as well as with society's attitude towards divorce, with its subtly expressed disapproval. Death tends to evoke sympathy, compassion and pity and an at least temporary wanting to do for the bereaved family. In contrast to this, divorce is seen as a deliberate, possibly avoidable, condition, the result of actions involving two grownups, both of whom are seen as responsible for the breaking-up of the family. Overt and subtle blame is expressed in relation to both partners and both may feel stigmatized. This, in spite of the somewhat paradoxical fact that one marital partner is often seen as having caused the breakup. Thus, in spite of the increasing awareness of mental health practitioners and society at large, who claim to perceive divorce as the end result of a dysfunctioning marital relationship, this view is not really integrated, largely because of our human tendency to seek and usually find, a scapegoat. Labels like "the guilty party," "the deserting, uncaring father" or in rarer instances, "the abandoning mother" reflect our attitude of contempt and disapproval. Society at large reflects as well as plays into the family system which in its effort to find a new equilibrium often deals with the unsettling event by projecting the blame onto the former marital partner. Punitive actions and attitudes such as the pairing of visiting rights with support payments are frequent and often taken over by the community as represented by court lawyers and welfare agencies, each one representing one of the feuding parties. The children themselves are represented least in their emotional

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needs. They are often placed in a position in which they have to take sides against one parent, usually the one who has left the home. For his own reason, the child tends to judge the parent who left more harshly, although deep down he holds both parents responsible for the breakup of the home. Very young children may feel this even though the parent has died, since death on a more primitive level is experienced as desertion. This is more pronounced when the family surrounds the death with an aura of secrecy which often leads to a family taboo and tends to add to the child's feeling vaguely guilty for what has occurred.

In either case, children feel that they have absolutely no control over their destiny and that those who are supposed to protect them, namely their parents, have failed to do so. Their anxiety during and after the immediate crisis gets heightened and tends to get expressed either through acting out (aggressive behavior or symptoms) or the event itself gets denied, with the result that feelings aroused by the loss are neither fully expressed nor worked through, but rather tend to go underground. Moreover, contrary to other traumatic events in the life of a child, death or divorce of a parent finds both the remaining parent and the one who has left — in case of divorce — in a vulnerable position which in turn, makes it hard for him to sustain the child in his own feeling of loss. If the marital partner feels he has been deserted by his mate, he also feels angry and rageful, or, in the case of death, saddened and helpless. Thus, at a time when the child would most need sustenance and emotional availability on the part of the parent, the latter is often so preoccupied with his own feelings as not to be really available to the child. Instead, parents tend to see children as extensions of themselves, assuming that

they share their feelings and they resent any evidence that the child may, and in fact should, react differently.

While I have described some dynamics which tend to get set into motion when a parent leaves the home permanently, it is of course evident that divorce or death are not pathogenic or even highly problematic for all families. The way a family deals with any change, especially one which has serious emotional impacts, depends on the basic emotional health of the family, which includes the spouse who has become an outsider. Of equal importance are such factors as the ages of the children, the economic and health status of the family and the existence of meaningful support systems such as the extended kinship and community resources. In fact, there seems to be a reciprocal relationship which goes somewhat like this: the younger the children, the more dependent both the remaining parent and his child are on the support systems for physical, social and emotional survival and well-being. It is regrettable how little the most natural resource person, the absent spouse, is used in order to compensate for the lack.

The parent of very young children, however well adjusted and honestly facing with his children the partial or total loss of the other parent, finds himself in a most precarious situation. The mother is homebound in order to care for her young children, yet misses acutely the companionship and company of the marital partner. Economically, she is often forced to consider or actually undertake outside employment — prematurely from either her own or the children's point of view — and in case she decides to do so, she is dependent on the help of her family or the community. Even in the optimal situation, when a family extends itself and/or family day-care or child-care

centers are available (and which community can boast of the ready and sufficient availability of such resources?) the remaining parent, usually the mother, has to cope after a day of work with children who are emotionally needy, without getting adequate support for herself in her own right.

If a father is left with young children to care for, his situation is even worse because of cultural and societal expectations and limitations. Less well equipped than the mother to deal with young children, he does not even have the choice to stay home and care for them even on a temporary basis, until more permanent plans can be made. This represents one of the most uncovered needs in the community, since even if homemaker service is available, it is given with strings attached and for only a short time. It is rarely extended to serve grandparents who may be willing to partially care for the children in the absence of both parents, but cannot assume the full responsibility. Thus, fathers are often forced into decisions which are not thought through well: whether the children are placed with relatives or with strangers (in a foster home or institution), plans are usually made on the spur of the moment, without full consideration as to the pros and cons of a situation. Thus, another separation occurs at the very moment when children and parent need each other most. Referrals to social agencies at such a point are usually very helpful and can avoid decisions which add to rather than solve the problem situation. Sessions which include the nuclear family group and the interested relatives, if conducted appropriately by a therapist or counselor, may prevent poorly conceived plans which merely are based on practical aspects without taking the more complex emotional climate into consideration.

I recall the case of a father left with

three young children who, when his wife had a serious emotional breakdown which required long term hospitalization, turned to his in-laws, who agreed to take care of the children. The in-laws had never approved of the father as a suitable husband for their daughter and held him responsible for her breakdown. It was easier to blame him than to face their own guilt over their fragile daughter. Imagine the situation: the children were cared for in a new though not totally strange home by their grandparents who did not feel physically quite up to the chore. They sensed the hostile attitude in relation to their father as well as the father's tension when he visited. His tension was due to his own feelings regarding the way they were bringing up the children. He did not dare voice his questions, since he was dependent on their helping him out. The messages which were transmitted by all adults in the situation were overtly friendly but covertly hostile. The children who already had to cope with the traumatic loss of one parent, the somewhat less than total loss of a second parent and a new home with a new set of rules, were caught in a network of confusions, messages which said one thing and conveyed another. The father felt increasingly resentful, helpless and caught and since he was not a fighter, he withdrew increasingly from the situation. The children interpreted this as a further sign that he didn't really care for them and the in-laws were only too glad to have justification for their negative feelings about him. When the family came to the attention of the family agency, the children were extremely difficult and troubled; the father was embittered and the grandparents, who in a way had done the best they could, were fed up and antagonistic. It took a long time and much intervention to reestablish the original family by pro-

viding homemaker service and counseling, which enabled the father to come to grips with his own ambivalent and confused feelings and to help the grandparents get disentangled, yet remain in touch. The children needed to be permitted to talk about their own feelings in relation to their parents, which included the fantasy that mother would soon return and then all would be well and the anger they had with mother for her lack of caring for them properly which preceded the hospitalization. They also had to learn to give up playing out the father against the grandparents and vice versa, which they had done in the past.

There is a strong taboo in our society against expressing "bad" things about dead or mentally sick persons, in spite of the fact that these feelings exist in all of us and, if not expressed, tend to be acted out.

We have so far considered some of the predicaments the so-called single-parent family finds itself in both structurally and emotionally. As already indicated, statistics tell us that the majority of the single-parent families are headed by the mother, hence, most community efforts are geared to strengthen this unit so that it can find a functioning equilibrium. In reviewing the literature and going over the existing community services, I became increasingly aware how little the absent father is mentioned or if he is, his picture is stereotyped beyond recognition. Case records abound in unfavorable references to the absent father, even in cases where the wife was instrumental in expelling him. It is not uncommon to hear children refer to themselves as being "divorced." A most tragic and potentially fateful merging of roles seems to be occurring through the family's inability to differentiate sufficiently the role of the marital partner from the role of the parent. Unfortunately, as

mentioned above, the community at large reflects all too often this sorry state of affairs, which in part is caused by the fact that it is the mother who is the usual informant and who has a stake in depicting her former husband as bad so that she, herself, becomes more acceptable in comparison. Our attitudes therefore, are frequently colored by the picture an informant, who cannot help but be biased, gives us, yet we act as if we are dealing with "nothing but the truth."

Since few community programs consider the absent father as either in need of services or as still belonging to and a potential resource for his family, my secret agenda is to tease the absent, forgotten father out of the proverbial closet, to make the shadow figure more alive and to enable us to see the person beyond the stereotype.

There are three types of families in which the absence of the father is significantly, though pathogenically dealt with.

I. *Family where Separation is Incomplete ("the on-again, off-again divorce"):*

In these families, regardless of the legal status, both ex-husband and ex-wife are very tied to each other. The husband is a frequent, though usually unplanned visitor in the house and while ostensibly coming to see the children, he uses the time more to talk to his former wife and if possible, even sleep with her. Fighting occurs much in the same way it did while the family was still together — the spouses act as if they are still married and the children feel rightly that once again, their needs and interests are expendable in view of the transactions on the parts of their parents. While it is common that the ex-wives complain about the ex-husband's advances and often paint the men as "sex-hungry" monsters, one only has to observe the couple in action

(best in joint or family interviews) to find that the ex-wife as well as the ex-husband has an equal share in what goes on between them. In these families therapeutic intervention is extremely important in order to enable the family to sever the marital tie while working on strengthening the parental relationship which due to the above struggle, is diffuse and weakened. Basically the *as if* status of divorce has to be made into the reality of divorce.

II. *The "Abandoning" Father:*

On the other side of the ledger we find the single-parent family in which the father is so unwelcome that he has virtually given up having any contact with his children. Birthdays are forgotten, promised visits not kept and finally, years may pass without any sign of life from the father. The children feel abandoned and unloved and, naturally, take over their mother's description of their father as bad and uncaring. Needless to say, agencies coming in contact with these families are reluctant to involve the father except perhaps in a feeble attempt to make him cough up some money for camp or some special occasion. When he refuses to comply, agencies usually agree with the picture the mother has given in the first place and they join the family in labeling the man as ungiving. In these families there is no room for differences — however warm a child's dim memory is of his father, mother's perception and practical needs are bound to win out and leave the children with a vague feeling that their perception is not to be trusted. Gradually, the whole topic, *father*, becomes a taboo, including deep longings the child may have. I do not have to stress the unhappy consequences of this kind of situation for boys and girls alike. In order to please their mother, their own feelings have to go underground and they are left with a

sense that men are bad and not to be trusted.

As a family therapist, I have met some of these fathers in person, gotten to know their sides of the story and seen what happens when they participate in a family session. Children begin to reach out to them, often after they had a chance to express the anger at the desertion. Yet, much as the mothers may have clamored for closeness between children and father, when it does occur the mothers may tend to intervene in a desperate effort to reestablish the former polarization. Even in those cases where the father cannot sustain contact with the children, it is important that they face their struggle with him rather than that they do their mother's bidding and merge with her feelings. On the whole, these "abandoning fathers" are lonely, embittered and hurt men. Because of their strong sense of guilt, they often fail to fight for their rights which include the right to have contact with their children. Given the opportunity, many of them renew their contact with the children and a better relationship ensues, even if the father has remarried in the meantime. If this occurs, the whole family, including the mother, is the beneficiary.

There are, of course, some fathers who cannot be induced to participate even in one single-family session, yet even then, it is helpful to enable the family to talk about their fantasies, their hurt, their anger and their yearning in relation to the missing father. While the mothers may fight against their children's free expression and may act as if they were betrayed, the therapist's efforts are geared towards making all feelings allowable and to show that while the mothers' plights can be appreciated, the fathers, too, can become more human in the process. This is essential if growth is to occur, no matter what the presenting

problem is.

I recall a particularly touching incident in one of the families I worked with: An 11-year-old girl was brought to the agency because of severe somatic complaints including asthma, an incipient school phobia and generally fearful reactions to peers. After several weeks of treatment in which the therapist had suggested that Joanie may have thoughts about the father in spite of the effective family taboo evoked by mother that father not be mentioned because he was bad and had deserted them, the child confessed that she had opened a locked drawer in her search for the family's past. She had found her parents' wedding pictures, something which made her glad, since it proved to her that there was a time when her parents were happy and loved each other and this made her feel that she had been wanted. Somewhat later, she sobbingly told how she postponed going to the Yeshiva in the morning in order to avoid the painful moment of the morning prayer when it said, "Honor thy father and thy mother" and she had no father to honor.

III. *The more typical kind of divorce, however, falls into the middle category, which means that elements of incomplete separation between the marital partners continue to exist and the father is seen as the bad one, yet none of these elements are so pronounced that total merging or a total break occurs.*

In these families then, the absent fathers continue to have contact with the children, but the contact is often fraught with conflict and the children feel confused and often disloyal to one or the other of their parents. The children tend to be used as actual or emotional messengers, as spies and go-betweens and they become pawns in their parents' continued feud. Inquiries as to

the former marital partner's love life, financial circumstances or poor house-keeping habits are common. It is obvious that the roles these children have to carry are not healthy and that they have nothing to do with the children's own feelings and needs. Visiting is granted only when support payments are made; humiliating procedures such as not permitting the father to enter the apartment are seen as legitimate punishment for the former husband, but the mother doesn't realize how in the process of punishing the ex-husband, she also punishes her child. Seemingly, concrete issues become twisted, the battle is dissociated and displaced — it is not uncommon that a mother "forgets" to give a child the message that the father has called to cancel his promised visit, since he has to work overtime. The child, of course, feels that the father doesn't care and maybe after all, mother is right when she talks about father as "that s.o.b." The father is puzzled when he sees that the child withdraws increasingly and puts out an "I don't care" attitude, something which he perceives as his child's not caring for him.

The transactions and interactions of these families are less blatant and overt than in the families discussed earlier; the messages are more subtle and contradictory, leaving the child with confusion and bewilderment.

The question may be asked, what leads a parent to damage a child? Few parents do so knowingly and planfully. The answer to this is complex and related to the underlying dynamics of human behavior and a lack of awareness which leads to actions between the warring ex-spouses with unfortunate consequences for the children. No doubt that the burden on the caretaker parent is greater as is the proneness to resent the children or to make them the very center of one's life. The parent

living away from home is perceived by the former mate as having it easy, leading the life of Riley. Being preoccupied with the hardships of his own life, the caretaker parent cannot empathize with the loneliness and hardships of the other parent, whose freedom can only be envied, even if freedom means living in a dingy, furnished room and spending much of one's salary to support the children. I have read some very moving articles on the plight of the lonely fathers who yearn to be reunited with their families and who truly miss their children. This too, can lead to problems, since children, especially the older ones, are more able to see the other side and begin to want to make up for their father's loneliness, and oedipal fantasies of keeping house for father are rampant in many adolescents. Many of the children experience also a faint discomfort due to guilt in relation to their parents' divorce. The guilt is at times intensified by thoughtless remarks on the part of the parents when they state that their marriage was fine until Johnny came along or when they blame Johnny for ruining their marriage.

A certain amount of tragedy accompanies the breakup of any marriage — feelings of desertion and helplessness lead to anger and jealousy, to depression and a strong sense of guilt and failure. Yet, the truly tragic aspect lies, in my thinking, in the fact that many of the problems could be avoided, if these feelings would be expressed and faced — jointly, if possible, and in the presence of the children. Instead of using blame and withdrawal, the family could take the first step towards the necessary shift in relation to the severing of the marital and the modification of the parental relationship. Since divorce is not applicable to biological ties, the children remain the *joint responsibility of both* parents, the parent with whom they

stay and the parent who lives apart. Some decision-making, long-range discipline and nurturing can be undertaken jointly, albeit in a somewhat changed way, by both parents. This occurs rather normally in families where fathers have to be absent due to their jobs or because of illness and in those families where a separation occurred, but where both partners continue to function in their roles as parents.

While I have earlier talked about a structural imbalance in the single-parent family which does indeed place a heavier burden on the caretaker parent, the problems which so often face all family members after a separation can be reduced if divorce as well as death is seen as a crisis in family living which needs to be dealt with at least initially, by the whole family.

If mental health practitioners would be more attuned to this need, ways and means could be found to help families during these periods of intensive crisis, much in the way professionals are available to intact families. I suspect that some of the reluctance to do so may be related to the anguish we feel when exposed to these crises which cannot help but touch us in the most visceral and personal terms. Professionals, too, may tend to deal with their different feelings by either avoiding difficult situations or by stereotyping them. When families sense this, they feel reluctant and ashamed to turn to agencies for help at a time when they are most vulnerable.

In closing, I want to stress that I consider it a misnomer when we call a family where a father and mother do not live together a single-parent family. The label itself seems to imply that we value the absent parent little and that we do not recognize how important a role he carries in relation to his family. As in any family, the "absent" father can be warmly caring or be pathologi-

cally rejecting. Our failure to grasp this concept fully, and to act upon it, adds to the hardship of a family whose task it is to restructure itself.

I want to end with a quotation by Lillian Hellman, who in relation to her own past life experience said that she

hopes to show how "old conceptions replaced by a later choice can be a way of seeing and then seeing again." I hope that we will be able to move in this direction — to replace the old conception of the single-parent family with a new one, by seeing these families in a new way.