

SMPG: The Heart of SENG
Helping Your Gifted Child Through Divorce: Part 2
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In 1981, SENG established guidelines for SENG Model Parent Support Groups (SMPGs). SMPGs bring together groups of interested parents of gifted and talented children to discuss such topics as motivation, discipline, stress management, and peer relationships. This column offers information and advice based on the experience of trained SMPG facilitators, both to apply in their own parent groups and for other parents to use and learn from. Learn more about the SMPG program at http://www.sengifted.org/smpg_parent_groups.shtml.

Over the last 27 years, I have had the opportunity to serve families and children pre- and post- divorce in a variety of roles, including educator, counselor, and mediator. Over the last 30 years, my husband, a clinical psychologist, has served children and families and the courts in a variety of roles: therapist, court appointed custody evaluator and parenting coordinator. This article is a collaboration between the two of us.

Adultizing and Enmeshment

In "Helping Your Gifted Child through Divorce, Part 1," we ended with being careful about falling into the traps of adultizing and enmeshment. Adultizing is talking to and leaning on a child for advice and emotional support. It is easier to fall into the trap of adultizing the gifted child than the typically developing child because sometimes gifted children seem more like adults than children in their vocabulary and ability to converse on an adult level. For this reason, it can be all too easy for a parent to share things that are inappropriate for a child to hear. In one family that I have worked with, the mother had an affair and told her teenage son to assuage her guilt and because she had "no one" else to talk to. The affair may have happened because her husband and she had drifted apart and she had no support system of friends. That still doesn't make it appropriate to share that type of information with the gifted child.

In the SENG Model Parenting Group Book, *A Parent's Guide to the Gifted Child*, the authors relate, "Some bright pre-adolescents and adolescents are given adult status too early, and they may later openly critique your friends or expect you to consult with them before you date others" (2007, p. 240). Adultizing a child confuses their role in the family and forces them to take on responsibility for the well-being of one or both parents.

This adult responsibility translates to a lost childhood free of adult worries and problems. That childhood experience can never be replaced. The child may take on this adult role without the adult forcing it upon them. They may ask questions about living arrangements, mortgages, paying the bills. It is important to address them at an age appropriate level and offer reassurance.

Enmeshment occurs when a parent's life satisfaction is dependent upon his or her children's activities and achievements. In these cases, it is difficult to see where the child ends and the parent begins. Newly divorced parents can easily become enmeshed with their child because there is no longer another adult in the home with whom to interact. And sometimes enmeshment happens when parents see children "squandering" opportunities that the parents didn't have but wish they'd had, like piano or drama lessons, and they then push the child to achieve in one or more of those areas (Miller, 1996).

Ways that Children Adapt

Children, in general, seem to adapt in one of four different ways, as identified by the excellent research of Janet Johnston and Linda Campbell (1988). These four main methods by which children deal with parental separation and conflict are a product of age, gender, and temperament. Given the unique qualities of the gifted child, these different approaches to coping may be expressed to a greater degree or intensity. They include the following:

- 1. Maneuvering** – These children become masters at manipulating their parents to get their needs met. Little by little, they learn to take care of themselves first.

2. Equilibrating – These are the children who become diplomats. They are desperately trying to keep everything under control. On the surface, they seem composed, well organized, and competent. However, under the surface, they are likely to be perpetually anxious. They learn to hide their feelings and to seek safe ways out of the parental conflict.

3. Merging – These are the children who often become enmeshed in the conflict. They may side with the parent they are with at the time. They split their identities in half and have little individual sense of themselves. They are usually unwilling to express their own wishes or desires. Thus, they protect each parent and ensure their loyalty to each parent by “merging” with the parent who is present.

4. Diffusing – The highly reactive child responds to the conflict the way they typically respond to other forms of stress. They may appear to shatter emotionally; in other words, they may appear to be emotional disorganized, emotionally distraught and generally out of emotional control.

Not surprisingly, it has been our observation that the gifted child also copes with the disintegration of the family along these same lines. Because of their intensities, the impact on gifted children may result in more severe reactions.

One must also keep in mind that parents of gifted children in the throes of an unhappy relationship are likely to be depressed and preoccupied. Just when a child may need the parent(s) the most, the parent(s) may be less available, physically or emotionally. Also, parents of gifted children may be inclined to expect their very bright child to be able to handle emotions and concerns competently, since the child has done so well up to this point in time. Their school work has always been great; and before they have been so mature and so competent so far in life.

Additionally, parents in the throes of separating from, and divorcing their partner often misinterpret what a child, especially a young, very bright child, might say. Toddlers who are more advanced in language development use their language skills to help master the separation experience or attempt to control it. When a two year old questions her mother by asking, “Mama hate papa?” the mother grows angry and interprets the statement as proof that the father was indoctrinating the child. Simply because young children have advanced language abilities does not mean they will grasp the complex relationship between their parents.

Maneuvering

Consider the case in which a young man's parents separated. He is a brilliant 16 year old. One parent

moved to one state, while the other parent worked for weeks at a time in another state and returned to the home occasionally, where this young man had been left to fend for himself, independently. Although one part of this young man was happy to be left to his own devices, he also engaged in considerable manipulation of his parents, especially his father. He was angry, perfectionistic, and idealistic. He also possessed a strong sense of entitlement, and when the world did not conform to his expectations, he would withdraw. By withdrawing, he escaped into video games, and his academics suffered. Because his father had high expectations of him, his father would travel more often back home to “straighten out his son.” While it may not have been conscious, this adolescent managed to maneuver the situation quite well. He got his father's attention.

Equilibrating

Johnny, an eight-year-old boy, is involved in multiple activities that include violin, piano, drum and singing lessons, as well as attending the Sylvan program to help him with his school work. When seen jointly with his mother, Johnny suggested that all these lessons were his dad's ideas. He said his father makes him practice violin for three hours. He gets mad about having to take so many lessons. His days are clearly filled with school and after school activities. Interestingly, when his father brought him to the appointment, Johnny said he doesn't mind all the activities, although he doesn't particularly like singing.

He noted that his father talks to him about going to different schools. Johnny didn't seem to express much interest in changing schools, because he would miss his friends.

This child is overly cautious about what he says and does with each of his parents. He is quite aware of the parental conflict and his place in it. He is careful about not disappointing either parent, nor does he want to cause tension because of his awareness of the conflict. He won't call the non-possessing parent from either home. In fact, he seems so eager to please and not disappoint, that when he perceives he has failed one or the other parent, he may take the anger and frustration out on himself. He was in the first and second grade when he got angry and cut himself. When asked why he would hurt himself, he said because his mom got mad at him for doing something. He will also hit himself if he isn't doing as well as he thinks he should in school. There is a lot of pressure being brought to bear on this child by both his parents, and his father in particular.

This is the equilibrating child. This is also the gifted child who is set on making sure everything is fair and equal, to organize things and people, making sure neither parent is upset and taken care of. This is the child who, when you discuss time spent with each parent, will insist on spending **equal time with each parent: it would only be fair**. Hence, with respect to the parental conflict, the child could simultaneously experience the juxtaposition of different interests and abiding conflicted feelings and seek a solution that would meet the needs of both of his parents.

Merging

Frequently the bright, perfectionistic child is inclined to merge with one parent over the other. Anger at the vagaries of the world, the inequities and unfairness of events can play a significant role in how the gifted child copes with family problems. Out of anger and idealism, the child may not be able to accept that human relationships are ambiguous and that the reasons families disintegrate are equally unclear with no clear guidelines as to who is right or wrong. It is intolerable to think grey when one insists things are black or white, right or wrong. A way out of the conundrum is to "choose sides" and align with one parent. Richard Gardner invoked the term "Parental Alienation syndrome" (PAS) to identify some of these highly aligned children.

Whether there is such a syndrome or not is being debated. However, our observations and experience have convinced us that with the perfectionistic, gifted child, the means of coping with the ambiguity and anger resides in aligning with one parent. Children between the ages of six to 12 or 13 are most vulnerable to this means of coping. Alliances of this type seem to result from a convergence of facts: the child's capacity to conceptualize the whole system of emotional relations in the family, and his or her tendency toward uncompromising views (moral) of the situation. However, unlike PAS, the aligned gifted child may swing back and forth between parents at different times. This is especially true given the emotional intensities seen in some of the children. These are the children who try to make sense of the dispute between their parents and determine who was right, and who was wrong.

Another case reflects just such a pattern of swings in alignment. This 14-year-old boy is highly gifted with both OCD features and Tourettes syndrome (a twice exceptional child). At one point in time, he will be aligned with one parent almost to the exclusion of the other. He will be angry and at times hostile to the excluded parent. Two or three weeks later, he will come in, and his demeanor toward the excluded parent will have done a 180 degree shift, and the parent with whom he was aligned will now be on the outs. It's not

always clear what triggers the shift.

Diffusing

There are few good studies of the impact of emotionality on coping with parental divorce. Some studies break down emotionality into two subtypes: positive and negative emotionality. No where can be found research on the presence of emotional overexcitabilities and the impact on coping with crisis. These are the children who react intensely to the disintegration of the family.

For example, two years after their parents divorced, two children ages eight and twelve, both gifted and highly emotional, continued to have difficulties with emotionality. Dramatic, emotional, and highly imaginative--whenever there were changes about to occur with either parent, it was if the world were ending. One parent was moving about 600 miles away, and the thought of changing schools and activities and friends triggered tears and anger in both children as well as meltdowns in one of them.

Another child may create complex fantasies. A ten-year-old boy resolved his loyalty dilemmas by creating a complex fantasy of living with Buck Rogers in a mansion on another planet, and when his parents argued, he would jump in and karate chop them.

The bright, sensitive child may also be quick to sense a parent's sadness and assume the role of caretaker or rescuer.

Parental Influence

All the above styles of coping, whether by the average child or the gifted child, are influenced by parents. High conflict between parents is widely recognized to create added risk for the children. The research literature on children in general tends to suggest that children who adapted more successfully were on the whole, intelligent, attractive, and more skilled socially. Their self-confidence and more cohesive and independent view of themselves seemed partly to derive from successful achievements and relationships in various other areas of their lives.

One must also keep in mind that, more often than not, gifted children come from gifted parents. Gifted parents also have their own intensities that can aggravate an already difficult situation.

How Parents Can Reduce Risk to Children

In their wonderful book, *Cradles of Eminence*, Victor and Mildred Goertzel (2004) examined the childhoods

of famous men and women and wrote the following about eminent people from troubled homes:

- [N]ormality, as evidenced by a lack of internal tension; adequate social, economic, and familial adaptation, and harmonious integration with other individuals at all levels, implies a lack of creativity, imagination, and spontaneity. The comfortable and contented do not ordinarily become creative (p. 134).
- Children in these turbulent and explosive homes do not always enjoy life. They suffer intensely at times, and they are deeply capable of suffering since they are sensitive and aware individuals (p. 135).
- In the homes that cradle eminence, creativity and contentment are not congenial. Both parents and children are often irritable, explosive, changeable, and experimental. They are prone to depression and exultation. They make terrible mistakes and win wonderful victories (p. 133).

Here are some ways that parents can reduce the mistakes, and maximize victories.

1. Be cooperative. Low-conflict, co-parenting relationships have been linked to better child outcomes. Having a concise "parenting agreement" will help you to avoid conflict.
2. Accept and appreciate your child's uniqueness.
3. It is easy to fall into the trap of parentifying or adultizing your gifted child. Be careful about "too much" sharing of information with your child(ren) about matters that should be managed by the adults. Your gifted child is curious and sensitive. Gifted children are not miniature adults.
4. Children have "big ears" and you can bet they will be listening into conversations and picking up court documents, etc. They glean from the adults around them that something is going on. Don't lie to them, don't patronize them. Be truthful, but also be diplomatic and age appropriate.
5. Do not demean the absent parent to or in front of the children. It is the healthy parent who recognizes the importance of the other parent to the child(ren) and will facilitate the relationship with the other parent.
6. Avoid letting the child get in the middle of disagreements.
7. Be aware of your own intensities, sensitivity, and other such traits that may define you as a gifted adult. As the authors note in *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*, "Just as with gifted children, your passion, idealism, concern for quality, perfectionism and impatience may be great strengths, but they can also be hindrances." This is especially true during the trying times associated with the

disintegration of a relationship.

8. Be careful about not living out your own fantasies through your child.
9. Take care of yourself. When marriages and partnerships end, grief and anger follow. That is normal. It is normal to have mixed feelings and to feel several different ways all at once. Sometimes, parents can become caught up in their own misery and difficulties so that the children, who are also living the crisis, get pushed into the background.
10. Communication between separated parents is essential. You may not like each other, but parents are responsible for their children and for creating the environment and opportunities for them to develop in a healthy manner. While parenting styles may differ, expectations from one household to another should overlap. Communicate by email if necessary regarding your kids.
11. Just because there is strife and stress, just because relationships fail and times are hard, just because you make mistakes and are imperfect, does not mean your children will be damaged, will be a failure, or will not achieve.

Take an active interest in how your children are coping with the divorce. Look at the process and effects from your child's point of view. Try to understand their coping style and whether it is working for them or not. If not, gently guide them to a better style of coping. In summary, the single best step you can take is to keep the lines of communication open with your children.

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