

### DECONSTRUCTING A FAMILY

#### *Developing New Roles & Relationships After A Divorce*

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Family roles and relationships take years to develop. When parents divorce, deconstructing a family is also a process, one which takes time and careful planning so that adults and children can adjust to the many changes which will occur. Even adults who may have agonized over *making* a decision to divorce, sometimes *implement* this decision impulsively and create emotional adjustment problems for themselves and for their children.

Sometimes divorcing adults feel the only way to break their dependency upon a spouse is to do so with anger and conflict. It is much easier to leave a husband or wife whom one hates than to acknowledge a marriage has been on life-support for many years and to calmly, but sadly, dissolve a marital partnership. Divorcing parents can and do say they want to put their children's needs first. This is rarely possible when adults are immersed in the raw emotion which follows a hastily implemented separation.

Occasionally, a very sophisticated parent will refer him or herself into individual psychotherapy to develop a plan for the dissolution of a family. However, typically a mental health professional is not the first resource with whom a divorcing parent makes contact. More commonly an individual will approach a member of the clergy, an attorney, or friends and neighbors. Guidance from friends and family is sometimes not genuinely instructive while advice from clergy or attorneys may speak only to relevant spiritual and legal matters.

It is important that a divorcing parent really grasp that deconstructing a family is a skill which needs to be learned. It is not an intuitive process whereby in-

dividuals can just "look into their hearts" and instinctively act in a manner which fosters all family members' healthy adjustment.

Divorcing parents can best be helped by: 1) Acquiring the skills necessary to deconstruct a family. 2) Working with the other parent to develop a plan for separating, which includes a preliminary arrangement for separate residences that maintains parents' relationships with their children, and 3) Implementing this plan carefully and slowly with ongoing preparation of the children and support from other adults so the process does not occur too quickly.

Many times the adjustment difficulties children have to parental divorce have more to do with a haphazard implementation of a new family structure, which is confusing and frightening to a child, and not with the fact of the divorce itself. Emotionally distraught parents sometimes behave in a manner which communicates to a child that the child must reject the other parent or which communicates that neither parent can be available as an authority figure.

Ways in which parents can acquire the skills they need to transition from one, two parent family into two, one-parent families include reading self-help books, participating in support groups for divorcing parents, and consulting professionals *before* implementing a plan to divorce. Consulting an attorney for legal direction and a parent coordinator for psychological direction affords divorcing parents an opportunity to prevent legal, financial and mental health problems from developing later and facilitates positive post-divorce adjustment for all family members.