

BOOK REVIEW

WHEN MOM & DAD DIVORCE

NICKMAN, Steven L.
Julian Messner, N.Y., 1986
\$9.95 Paperback, 78 pp.

Reviewed by :- James M. Cotta Director, Court Counselling, Family Court of Australia, Dandenong

It is generally agreed that marriage breakdown is a crisis event that triggers a variety of raw emotions, ultimately culminating in the transition of the intact family to two new families: the family children live with and the family they visit.

Studies in this field have forecast about one third of present marriages will end in divorce. Coupled with the staggering figure that there are over 200,000 children living in single parent homes, the need for effective services and information giving is critical to ensure family members, in particular children, can cope with their new life.

It should be remembered, whilst the situations and effects of separation are universal, the book is written by an American clinician and mention of the Court and its employees refer to the American system, not that found in Australia, ie. The Family Court of Australia.

However, the preference of parents making important decisions such as living and visiting arrangements is common within both jurisdictions.

Nickman's book goes some way in providing young readers, parents and professionals, with the many situational changes presenting to children during separation. The book is not concerned with determining how children will be effected by separation, but instead the author presents options and examples for children to think about when they feel guilty, like a possession, responsible or angry when their parents separate.

He does this effectively by presenting seven short stories, each depicting a child's reaction to the various stages affecting a family when the disruption of separation occurs. Separation is about sudden changes and unknown outcomes.

The book gives a good deal of attention to the needs, problems and demands made on children. In simple language it gives some helpful information about the effects of separation on children and tackles the difficult subject of how children can cope with separation and how to deal with the resultant emotional upheaval. Primary and adolescent aged children talk about their feelings of confusion and helplessness whilst confronted by their parent's decision to separate. At the end of each story, the author provides useful strategies that children can use to alleviate their anxious feelings.

Each scenario spells out the many changes and challenges which confront children as they struggle for stability. For instance, when children are not told what is happening in their family, they will develop their own reasons and fears about the

separation. The very issue of a child's status within the family is often undermined as their rights are ignored when parents are so upset they do not explain well enough to children what is happening. This naturally engenders feelings of resentment, worthlessness and sometimes, being treated like a possession.

Other chapters feature how it feels at the beginning, when Mum and Dad both want you and adjusting to step-families. The author notes at the time of separation, clear arrangements for when children will see their absent parent will ease feelings of confusion, sadness and loneliness. A candid point made is that when parents first separate, things usually get worse before they get better.

Whilst recognising the importance of parents deciding where children should live, the book then reviews the alternatives if the decisions are abdicated to the Court. Children are reminded of four rules when parents both want them:

1. A child is a person with feelings;
2. No one can make you choose;
3. Parents are fighting with each other, you do not have to help them fight; and
4. Things usually work out eventually.

This book is a useful acquisition for professionals and parents. I believe it could be used effectively if an adult reads the book with a child or, as important, has it available when a child wishes to refer to the book.

The author has skillfully presented sensitive information for a cross-section of readers. The book will probably have a greater impact for children of parents motivated towards resolution and outcomes suited to their children's needs, than those parental situations where conflict prevails.

The use of Mum, instead of Mom, and children, instead of kids, may well suit an Australian audience, however, the style of writing and excellent content far outweigh the use of such American terminology.

ANNIE STORIES.

Doris Brett
McPhee Gribble Penguin. AUSTRALIA., 1986.
\$12.95. 207pp

Reviewed by :- Glenda Newell, Psychologist,
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"Annie Stories" came about through the author's personal experience with parenthood. A psychologist with diverse talents, ranging from prize winning poetry to breadmaking, Doris Brett has produced a delightful story book, based on sound psychological principles, for parents to use with children in times of trouble and strife.

Attempting to allay her own daughter's anxiety about kindergarten, and seeing the rational, sensible, reassuring approach having no effect at all, Ms. Brett began to tell a story about another child in the same predicament. As the story was told (and retold) the anxiety lessened and so the "Annie Stories" were born. The book combines stories for children which are imaginative, poetic, lively, poignant, funny and sad, with an explanatory framework for parents on why the stories work. The overall result is a well planned, very readable book.

The author devotes the first two chapters to a brief overview of child development theories and the reasons behind the storytelling approach. The individuality of a child is discussed and parents encouraged to tailor stories to suit their children and circumstances.

The "Annie Stories" provide examples for parents, of stories built around events that most children will encounter in their lives such as starting kindergarten, fears, the death of a loved one. Nightmares, divorce, pain and hospitalization are also covered. Each topic is a chapter, prefaced with a brief preamble for parents, followed by the relevant story. Throughout the story, the psychological impact is explained through a simple footnote system which employs symbols to indicate points of interest. I found this unobtrusive to the text and informative. Ms. Brett is a rollicking good storyteller and I thoroughly enjoyed her stories. In fact, her stories are such that many parents may opt for simply reading what's written rather than creating their own stories to suit a child's particular needs. In this instance, young children (under 5 years) may find the stories long and hard to follow, which would reduce the chance of the story having the desired effect. Perhaps more direction to parents of preschool children would have been helpful.

Ms. Brett's rationale for her stories is valid. She offers sound psychological principles and practice with good common sense mixed in. However, there are two important therapeutic factors not stated by the author but which can be readily deduced. One, parents using this book become empowered to help their children, thus relieving their own anxiety, and two, a relationship between a parent and child who share such story times can only improve.

Personally, I have recommended the book to parents to use at home, and I have also participated in the story process with parent and child (at times providing invisible dream rings when they've run out at home). Either way, I regard "Annie Stories" as an asset for therapist and parent alike. The book offers a sound and enjoyable strategy to help children deal constructively and positively with the darker side of life.