

John Lorenz, PhD

**The Toxic Stress of Divorce**

# Maine AAP Meeting



*"Daddy, can I stop being worried now?"*

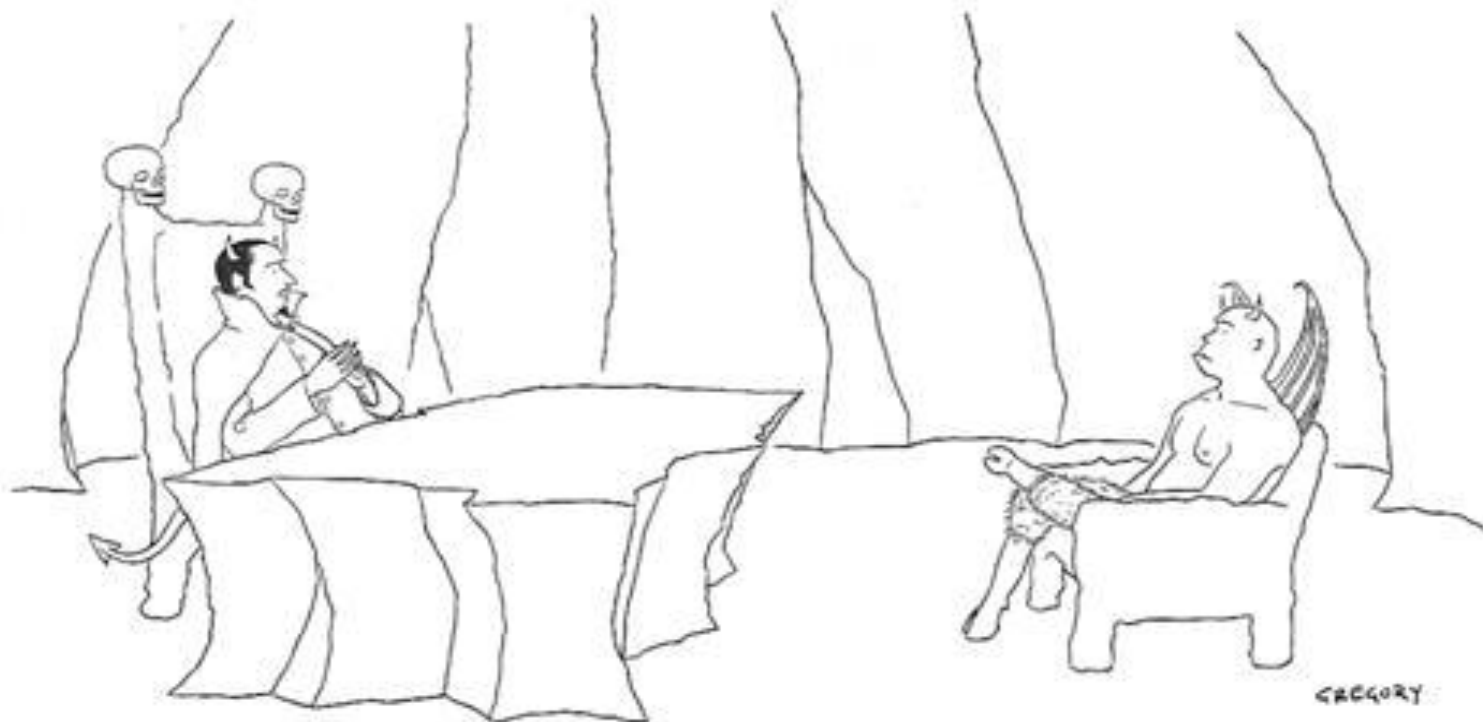
# Maine AAP Meeting

May 2015

- Divorce: Impact on children and families
- Toxic stress/ACES

# Hard day in Court





*"I need someone well versed in the art of torture—do you know PowerPoint?"*



# Conflict between parents often requires court to act as referee.

Children left out when parents are engaged in battle

Parents have decreased ability to focus on needs of children

Parental stressors include psychological/emotional, financial, loss of family support

# CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Changes in kids' needs happen faster than court can respond
- Litigation can take months
- Deviation in contact schedule often a power struggle that children avoid discussing with parents for fear of causing problems



# Understanding High Conflict Parents

- Lack trust of other parent
- Usually angry and hurt secondary to divorce
- Little or no constructive communication
- Use children as message bearers/pawns
- Choose litigation as first line of attack

# Adversarial Legal Process

- Usually increases conflicts
- Less civil with other parent on minor issues
- Encourages posturing for litigation
- Problems with Communication get worse
- Children's issues get lost because of conflicts
- Financial stress on family

# Model of Divorce Impasse:

- *Johnston and Campbell (1988) Impasses of Divorce, NY, Free Press*
- INDIVIDUAL—history of traumatic losses, psychopathology, vulnerable to humiliation/shame
- INTERACTIONAL—negative/hostile view of ex-partner, conflicted about the separation (shattered dreams)

# Model of Divorce Impasse #2

- Unrealistic view of child(ren)—not able to separate self from child, history of destructive marriage
- EXTERNAL: extended family involved in conflict, jealousy about new significant other, therapist's input, legal issues

“You make me want to be a better person than you.”



*“You make me want to be a better person than you.”*



# Children's Needs and Development

- Different ages have dramatically different needs from parents
- Things change over time
- Some children are more resilient, some more sensitive and vulnerable

# Infants and Toddlers

- Infants need to develop basic trust and security about the world
- Usually comes from primary relationship, usually mother (Sorry, dads)
- Primary factor to be considered for children under age one
- Need frequent quality contact with both parents



# Infants and Toddlers #2

- 6 months to 18 months
    - a. Need predictable, stable routine
    - b. Overnights may be stressful for some children who need security of own room, toys, etc.
    - c. Children have limited or no time concept
- Warning signs: Regression in toileting, irritability, problems with language, isolation

# Infants and Toddlers #3

- 18 months to 3 years:
  - a. Need to develop sense of autonomy, separation from primary tolerated
  - b. Overnights should be considered and assessed for child's tolerance
  - c. Parents need to be prepared for expected tantrums, stubbornness, demands
  - d. Splitting may develop - "good parent, bad parent"
  - e. Language development is critical - must be aware of difficulties such as stuttering, articulation problems



# Preschool Years

- Growth in understanding feelings, sex role identification, attachment for others, understanding of ideas, rules, limits
- Exuberance for life is unsurpassed
- Needs:
  - a. Predictable schedule, no stress exchanges, no bad talk about other parent
  - b. No conflict between parents

# Preschool years #2

c. Predictability at each home, i.e. not necessary for each home to be same,

d. Each parent should be involved in child's developing relationships away from family

e. Avoid introducing multiple new partners in child's life

GOAL: secure, confident child ready for entering world, good peer relationships, able to express needs clearly and tolerate frustration more effectively



# Grade School Years

- School, social, and family issues
- Loyalty conflicts may emerge if parents are not able to contain conflicts, feelings about other
- Structure of school, games and activities are reinforced by parents
- Home routine needs to reflect child's school needs and activity
- Both parents need to be involved
- If too much conflict should divide between activities or have split shifts





# Adolescence

- Tasks are increasing sense of independence and autonomy
- Learning to benefit from mistakes and correct actions accordingly
- Understand peer pressure
- Dating, sexuality
- School demands, career development

# Adolescence #2

- Parents should support appropriate choices and actions
- Child's needs for support and encouragement, not too much dependence on parent
- Risk of acting out behavior if parents have unresolved conflicts
- Loyalty binds develop again, may totally reject one or other parent
- Children can use parent split to manipulate

# Personality Dysfunction and Conflict

- High conflict cases often result of personality problems in parents that feed litigation
- Expect some problems in all divorces, not continuing and repeating issues with little recognition of impact on children

# Personality #2

- Problems seen:
  - a. Repeated mistakes with little ability to change approach
  - b. Focus on own needs, unable to see another point of view, i.e. child's need for other parent
  - c. Easily slighted, overly sensitive to criticism
  - d. Unstable mood

# Personality #3

e. Entitled

d. “My reality is the only reality”

- Often very longstanding and resistant to change and treatment
- Problems usually exacerbated by stress
- Not always pervasive, may have areas of strength and competence (work, business)

# Conflict and Children's Adjustment

- Parental conflict consistently identified as predictor of poor post-divorce adjustment for children
- Children often struggle with diminished contact with significant parent and other family members as result of conflicts
- Children often report relief after divorce because witness less conflict on regular basis
- Most families develop post divorce truce after 2 years—10% CONTINUE TO HAVE HIGH LEVEL OF CONFLICT

# Parents Post divorce

- Often become preoccupied with own life, stressors
- Higher levels of depression, drug/alcohol abuse, medical problems
- Can develop unhealthy tendency to “lean” on children for support
- High level of conflict leads to poorer parenting decisions

# Parents post divorce #2

- Mothers can become less warm and nurturing, over discipline
- Father's withdraw from children, become remote



# Parent's Post divorce#3

- Significant number of children (25%) have no post divorce relationship with father
- New partners in parent's life can be factor
- Stressful for children to have serial adults in home

# Impact of Conflict on Children

- Research findings most children harmed by conflict more than divorce itself
- Mixed findings about who is more at risk
- Problems for children include, anxiety, depression, hyper vigilance (alert for more conflict), distortion of reality, confusion about identity development, distrust of adults

# Risk and protective factors

- Risk: History of Domestic violence or witnessing violence
- Level of parental conflict
- Child abuse
- Poverty
- Poor support system post divorce
- Substance abuse

# Protective Factors

- Cooperative parenting
- Warmth of parent toward child
- Financial stability
- Consistency in discipline, parenting
- Monitoring of child's activities
- Emotional stability of parents



*"Sam, neither your father nor I consider your response appropriate."*

EXIT

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"We wanted the marriage to end at any cost and  
the lawyers made sure it did."

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THOMAS

"Rough divorce, huh?"