FORENSIC COUNSELING SERVICES

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"I'm Not Safe" – Approaching Children's Anxiety Amidst Family Conflict

A common issue we deal with in high conflict families is children expressing they are scared, uncomfortable, or otherwise anxious/distressed regarding a particular issue. Often this is something that isn't well-articulated by a child who may not fully understand their feelings. This can lead to various co-parenting problems for the family, especially where there are concerns the child may be attempting to deal with distress about their exposure to adult issues for which they lack the cognitive, emotional, and biological maturity[1] to really understand and process. Children's lack of coping skills in response to such exposure can further exacerbate coparenting issues, creating a negative feedback loop that only worsens problems.

One productive step in dealing with children's anxiety is to sort out what is occurring.[2] Often these kinds of expressions from children fall into discernable categories:

Understandable concerns. When drilling down on an issue there are often distinct issues which can be recognized and addressed. Individual circumstances likely require different responses, but the goal in each case is to address the underlying issue. Taking just one example, a child may be school-avoidant because they…

- …are dealing with a bully. The bully may need to be reported to school staff so systemic interventions can take place, but the child may also need skill building to be able to set healthy boundaries and talk about their experience.

- …are having a personality conflict with a teacher. Whether this stems from unmet expectations that need to be voiced, increasing academic demands as a child matures, large class size preventing individualized attention, or other issues, the child can be engaged in skill building to improve their social interactions.

- … are encountering physical concerns. The child who is afraid of the reptile collection in a teacher's classroom may need to work on desensitization through exposure rather than staying trapped in their anxiety.

[1] During adolescence, and lasting into early adulthood, the brain undergoes major transformations which increase the ability to engage in higher-order thinking, improve attention and reasoning, and create the neural connectivity of the adult brain. Children, quite literally, lack the brain structure to process adult issues adequately.

[2] Please recognize this is a high-level discussion meant to help in moving these issues forward rather than a magic cure-all. Each of the situations discussed could be addressed in pages of advice, and each child will need different supports. Talk with your child's mental health professional about specific situational details.

In all of these situations, there is a problem-solving approach that can be implemented in order to help children overcome their anxiety and deal with their situation in an age-appropriate manner.

Existential dread. Other times when children express fear or a lack of safety, there is no underlying issue to be addressed. They experience a persistent sense of unease and voice that there is simply something fundamentally "wrong" with some aspect of their life. This can be particularly challenging for families in conflict, where children may express feeling that a parent is "not safe" as a reflection of their own inner turmoil spawned by the dysfunctional nature of their parents' very relationship. There are several unfortunately common examples of this:

- A child voices that their parent is not safe because they got them a skateboard or other device their other parent does not approve of. The difference between a *parent* and a particular *activity* not being safe are abundantly clear. When there is an open disagreement where one parent has forbidden an activity that the other allows, the loyalty binds this creates can lead to a sense the more adventurous parent is inherently unsafe and thus anything about them produces anxiety.

- A child expresses that a parent does not know how to care for them and that bad things will happen if they have to spend the night in that parent's new apartment.[3] The child shares that prior to the divorce that parent also worked long hours to provide for the family and was often absent from caregiving routines as a result. The difference between parenting *history* and parenting *skills* is hopefully clear. In families where the reality that divorce means change[4] has not been addressed by both parents, children may have expectations which create fear when they must confront this reality.

- A child displays fear of being separated from a parent following repeated angry arguments between the parents in front of the child, and that child indicates that they need to stay with that parent to be "safe." Sometimes this can have little to do with actual parenting skills[5] and is an outgrowth of a disrupted sense of stability, as children depend on the adults in their lives as caretakers. Exposure to adult conflict can create a situation where the child perceives their best solution is to pick sides. Worse, children can both fear being abandoned because of, and angry at their parents for, this kind of toxic conflict. While the co-parenting conflict remains active so do these concerns.

In all these examples the underlying issue is not directly related to the parent, but to something intrinsic to the child. Focusing on one parent alone will not adequately address the child's

[3] This is a variation of a more developmentally common fear of the unknown or change that is sometimes seen with children experiencing other major life changes, e.g. a child who fears attending the first day of a new school and needs to learn through experience they can overcome such a challenge.

[4] E.g., one parent may have to work more/different hours than prior to the separation, whereas the other may have to be more active in the parenting tasks they previously left to a partner with a more flexible schedule.

[5] Indeed, sometimes a child might cling to the more toxic parent if they perceive them as the more powerful or feel less free to assert themselves with them, as is sometimes encountered in cases of domestic violence.

expressed sense of dread because the fundamental problem is the exposure of the child to the parental conflict. The child's sense that future co-parenting conflict will bring nothing but anguish is reflected in such fears, and it is this dynamic that needs to be addressed to help reassure them.

Stuck in the past. Often children experience sub-optimal events and challenges growing up. Some even experience traumatic events. It is important to differentiate between these types of situations so that the former do not become morphed into the latter. For children who have experienced trauma, it is critical that they receive professional help for them to process their past and not be irrevocably anchored to it as they move forward in life. Likewise, with less damaging but still poor experiences, parents do not want children to be stuck and unable to cope with the reality of adversity in an ever-changing world. For example:

- Children may have experienced a parent who mistreated them. Those children suffer further when they are unable to see changed behavior from that parent, and lack of change in a parent can place the child at risk for further trauma.

- A now-sober parent may have been emotionally absent from the child's life due to their addiction. If a child continues to only interact with the memory of that parent's past dysfunction, rather than experiencing the reality of their recovery, the original harm is compounded rather than repaired.

- Parents may have jointly burdened a child by unintentionally over-sharing adult information during a contentious separation. Even after parents learn healthier ways to communicate, the loyalty binds such communication creates for the child may still need to be addressed.

These can be challenging circumstances where a mental health professional needs to work with the whole family system to help translate improved parent and co-parent functioning into definitive and consistent actions that parents can take to bolster their children's developmental success.

<u>A Final Note on Avoidance:</u>

Avoidance is often referred to as a juvenile coping mechanism for good reason – children start off with few tools in their emotional toolbox, and it is easy to try and ignore problems. As children grow into healthy adults, they build skills to deal with challenges they will encounter the rest of their lives. For instance, appropriate assertiveness learned in the classroom can serve them well in the workplace. The ability to express and repair problems in a relationship can form bridges not just between classmates and teachers, but co-workers, managers, and friends throughout their lifespan. Likewise, a divorce or separation provides parents an opportunity to teach *healthy* conflict resolution and other skills children need to manage adversity in their lives that can benefit them for a lifetime.