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# Psychology and Family Law

## Lessons I Learned from My Parents

### Part II of a Series

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As a person who happens to have been an older minor child, and later dependent adult child of divorce, I must express the fact that in our society, we don't take many important things into consideration with regard to the "best interest of child" standard in the law. In the first article from this series, I discussed six of the lessons my parents taught me in a very painful and destructive manner. This portion of my series will be focused on the lessons children learn from their parents' extramarital affairs.

A book entitled, "Broken Circle -- Children of Divorce and Separation," gives voice to young adults talking about how their parents' divorce or separation impacted their lives, then and now. A parent's extramarital affair was mentioned by several of those now young adults. It is important to consider the words used by these children to describe their feelings, and the impact the affair had on them. They used the following words and phrases: "lying," "deceit," "hard time forgiving," "dishonest," "hurt," "betrayed," "heartbroken," "I've forgiven, but I'll never forget," "heartbreaking," "lack of respect," "cheating." Each of those children expressed how this experience caused them to be distrusting of everyone in their life from that point forward.

In my parents' case, our father had numerous affairs, many of which were with the single mothers of my sibling's friends, and with our mother's friends. In the beginning, he would end the affair with any one of these women after our mother learned about it and expressed to him her humiliation and embarrassment. However, it unfortunately wasn't long before he moved on to the next woman. If the above-mentioned sentiments convey the typical impact an affair can have on minor children of the marriage, imagine how much worse it is when the affair is with your friend's single mother, or with one of your mother's oldest and closest friends. I can certainly tell you that I experienced very strong feelings, similar to those mentioned by the other similarly-situated children. Moreover, the day after the ink was dry on their divorce decree, our father married my mother's childhood friend. Imagine the anguish felt

at this event, given that our respective families were well-acquainted, and used to take trips together! How might you think this played out with regard to the destructive nature of our parents' divorce, and their ability to co-parent thereafter? How might our father's choices have impacted our future relationship with him, or lack thereof?

I know one thing for certain -- it was only a matter of time before none of us had any further contact with our father. As will be addressed in future articles in this series, while the end of our relationship with our father may not have been *directly* related to his affairs, it was most definitely related to his inability to realize that his actions or inactions impacted his children, and to his need to destroy our mother at any cost--including the welfare of his own children.

Knowing how minor children may feel when one of their parents cheats on the other, shouldn't such things be taken into consideration when parents, their professionals, or judges design parenting plans? Is ignoring a child's feelings about an affair and other such things "in the child's best interest?" Depending upon the age of the child, should the parent who had the affair discuss the matter with the child in an appropriate fashion, or simply ignore it? Does ignoring the elephant in the room increase the likelihood that the other parent can poison the child against the parent who had the affair? Which option leaves the parent who had the affair most vulnerable?

I am by no means suggesting that a parent who had an affair should not be able to spend time with their children. However, I am suggesting that we begin to look at things from the child's perspective. We really shouldn't ignore such important factors when making decisions for ourselves or for others, including our children. By the way, when parents manage to systematically alienate themselves from their child(ren), as our father did, virtually nothing can be done to solve the problem afterwards. After all, pointing fingers and attributing blame and fault to anyone other than yourself has never been known to solve anything. Once people have children, maybe they should place the needs of their children ahead of their own.

This is the seventh lesson I learned from my parents, and hopefully others can learn from their mistakes.

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