
wednesday's child

By Margaret Winchell Miller, Edited by Michele Buckingham/Photograph by Charles Thatcher/T.S.I

AFTER VALERIE* AND HER HUSBAND SEPARATED, THEIR 3-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, Alison, became afraid of everything—afraid of the dark, afraid of loud noises, afraid of being away from her mother.

"She cried often and would sometimes hit me," Valerie says. "That wasn't like Alison at all."

Valerie suspected her daughter's behavior was a response to the emotional turbulence at home. "Although Alison was too young to verbalize her feelings," Valerie recalls, "she was obviously holding in a lot of pain."

Although Valerie was apprehensive about counseling, she knew her daughter would benefit from a professional therapist's help. "I didn't want Alison to blame herself in any way for her dad's moving out," Valerie says. "And I wanted her to know that I had done everything I could to help her through this difficult time."

A friend whose son had experienced similar fears during her separation referred Valerie to Maribeth Price, a Houston therapist, who specializes in working with children during or following loss. "My job is helping children who are going through big changes in their lives," Price explained to Alison.

During office visits, Price played games with Alison to help her learn new words to describe her feelings. As a result, at home Alison began saying, "I'm angry... I feel lonesome... I'm worried."

"Thanks to Maribeth," Valerie says, "we were able to communicate on a more honest level."

Although she did not attend Alison's sessions, Valerie also benefited from Price's counsel. Much of what Alison learned—the right of every person to express her needs, the importance of boundaries—helped Valerie and her husband as they worked through, and ultimately resolved, the conflict in their marriage.

Avoiding Emotional Scars

AS VALERIE LEARNED, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO SHIELD CHILDREN FROM ALL OF LIFE'S traumatic passages and problems. For some kids, that may mean coping with divorce, a parent's death, a life-threatening illness, or alcoholism in the home. For others, it may mean dealing with the death of a grandparent, the loss of a pet, a move to a new town, or peer pressure at school.

Whatever the degree of severity, painful circumstances can engender anxiety and fear in kids, who naturally crave peace and continuity in their lives. If the pain is left unattended, emotional scars can result, marking their lives through adulthood. But by offering the right kinds of love and support, wise parents can help prevent those scars from forming.

*SOME OF THE NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED.

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Dr. Paul Warren, a children's counselor at the Minirth Meier New Life Clinic in Dallas, says that what children need during stressful times is a sense of security. Parents can provide this by making the stability of their marriage and their own emotional well-being a priority.

Maribeth Price adds that parents can help by teaching their kids that their feelings are valid—neither good nor bad, right nor wrong—and that it's okay to ask for help. "This," she says, "is the very best gift a parent can give a child."

Still, it's often difficult for children, especially young children, to talk about their feelings. As Chuck Faber, a family counselor at Grace Fellowship Church in Timonium, Maryland, points out, children have a limited verbal menu—a disadvantage when it comes to discussing concerns and confusion. That's when a professional counselor can help.

Watching for Red Flags

DISCERNING BETWEEN "TROUBLING" BEHAVIOR THAT IS SIMPLY age-appropriate and behavior that requires professional counseling can be difficult. As Price notes, children often show signs of inner turmoil in their behavior rather than in spoken communication. "What seems to be an abnormal behavior is often exactly what children need to be experiencing to express their feelings," she explains.

To determine whether a child needs professional assistance, experts advise parents to watch for certain "red flags." A sudden, unexplained aggressiveness or solemnness, a dramatic change in personality, frequent crying, or spells of sadness may indicate emotional stress. So may common physical manifestations, like headaches and stomach pains.

Very young children may regress, returning to bed-wetting or wanting a bottle to reclaim the babyhood they have lost. "These are all parts of the behavior that goes on in the process of change," Price says. Depending on their severity, such behaviors may indicate a need for counseling.

Authorities agree that symptoms, such as excessive anger, destructive behavior, or any talk of suicide or an apparent death wish, are very serious and should always be considered signs of dysfunction, mandating professional help. With school-age kids, an abrupt drop in grades or problems in relationships with peers or authority figures outside the home may also warrant a counselor or therapist.

Professional counseling is only one part of an effective team approach to helping troubled children. Because parents typically understand their children better than anyone else, they play the pivotal role in detecting and resolving problems. Medical professionals and educators can also provide valuable assistance.

"Pediatricians are trained to identify, through questioning, problems that exist but to which the parent may be oblivious," says Dr. Dee Ragan, a Houston pediatrician with more than 32 years of experience. "He can advise and counsel parents on handling problems."

Ragan acknowledges that parents whose kids need professional help must often overcome the stigma attached to counseling. Once they do, however, a pediatrician is an

excellent source of referrals for counselors and therapists who work primarily with children.

Working as a Team

IF A PEDIATRICIAN CAN'T SHED LIGHT ON A CONSISTENT CHANGE IN a child's behavior, concerned parents can turn to school counselors and teachers for a second opinion. These professionals are particularly helpful to parents who may be unaware of academic problems, peer pressure, or social struggles their children are encountering at school.

Early last September, Elizabeth noticed that her daughter, Erica, a first-grader at Memorial Drive Elementary School in Baltimore, was behaving erratically at home, often exploding with temper for no apparent cause. At times, she would hit her younger brother, something she had never done before. At other times, she would become withdrawn.

On the days that Elizabeth volunteered at the school library, she recalls, "Erica would cry, begging me not to leave her." But when Elizabeth and her husband would question Erica about school, she couldn't tell them what was wrong.

Finally, in January, Elizabeth noticed a friend of Erica's hovering over her, as if to "take care" of her. When Erica wanted to check out library books, the little girl would examine them first "to be sure Erica could read them." She would "cluck" when Erica took too long to complete her schoolwork.

Suspecting her daughter was frustrated by this controlling friendship, Elizabeth immediately phoned the teacher and arranged to meet. Also present the day of the meeting was Kris Madorsky, counselor at Memorial and a former elementary school teacher, whom Elizabeth credits for helping to get to the heart of Erica's problem. "When the counselor asked our daughter what she was good at, Erica couldn't think of one thing," Elizabeth recalls. "Finally, she said, 'Handwriting.' We were stunned!"

Though she is a multitalented little girl, Erica sorely lacked confidence to express herself or to set boundaries in problem relationships. In fact, she avoided talking about her problems, fearing that if she mentioned them, she would be separated from her friend.

Through weekly meetings with Kris, Erica learned to verbalize her feelings, while she gained positive reinforcement at home that she is okay, regardless of her friends' opinions.

Madorsky believes the team of teacher, counselor, and parent contributed to Erica's triumph. Together they were able "to give her strategies to overcome the problem...many small steps that ultimately led to her success in working the problem out."

Behind Closed Doors

AT LEAST A DOZEN TIMES LAST YEAR, MADORSKY REMEMBERS recommending that certain kids move from infrequent school counseling sessions into more intense, regular counseling. Sometimes parents come with a child to a session. But more often, the counselor begins with the child alone.

Counseling with children and adolescents typically differs from adult counseling. Chuck Faber, like other counselors, believes an adult model of confrontation and dialogue doesn't work with children. Instead, he favors allowing children to express themselves through play and creative interaction.

"It's rare to find a child who is unwilling to play," he explains. "Children's counselors who are good at what they do are able to complete their investigations without children realizing that they're being counseled."

Madorsky agrees that problem-solving is not always a clinical, cut-and-dried experience. As a result, she tries to make her office a fun place kids want to come, where they can open up in their own way.

During the first visit, she admits, children may not talk at all. But by the second or third time, they will begin to communicate in a way that's comfortable for them. "Some children want to talk, but some would rather color or work with clay," Madorsky says. "Others might communicate better through puppets."

In general, Madorsky sees herself as an emotional support to children, not as someone who dispenses solutions. "Occasionally, the children I see just need an outlet. They may be intensely angry but have no safe place to vent those feelings," she says. "Often, I don't interpret. I just listen." When the kids do need solutions, she encourages them to find their own—after all, she notes, she won't always be around to help.

The role of a counselor, Madorsky believes, is to help others help themselves. "Problem-solving is an important skill for children to have," she says. "When a student comes in with a problem, we'll take out a piece of paper and write it down. We'll list all the possible solutions and the consequences of each one." She adds, "Children need to be able to say, 'I can work this out.'"

Methods Without Boxes

PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS DIFFER IN THEIR APPROACHES TO diagnosing and helping children express feelings and communicate with others. But sometimes a combination of techniques, particularly for children with more than one problem, provides the most comprehensive help.

Studies of obese children with emotional problems, for example, show that counseling combined with a diet and exercise program is more effective than behavioral treatment alone. If a child has been underachieving at school, failing to complete school projects or exhibiting discipline problems, educational testing might be used to investigate a potential learning disability.

Jack's mother, Carrie, said his second-grade teacher suggested counseling for him because of two concerns: poor academic performance and frequent behavior problems in class. At home, Carrie had to admit, her son was very argumentative and physically violent toward his new stepfather.

At the school's expense, Jack was tested by a local university. The results pinpointed some learning problems, along with a deep-seated anger toward his stepfather, which Jack was acting out in class.

"Educational testing helped us better understand our son," Carrie says. "We began to work at finding new methods of helping him learn and express his feelings, without boxing him into our own expectations."

Jack also began working out with a punching bag in the garage as a way of releasing aggression. To improve his grades and accommodate his unique learning style, Jack's teacher suggested he memorize his homework by reciting it into a tape recorder rather than by writing it. According to Carrie, these changes have made an enormous difference in her son's disposition and success at home and at school.

Through Tough Times

FAILURE TO WORK THROUGH THE GRIEF OF AN EARLY-LIFE tragedy, such as a parent's death or divorce, often results in depression or pain later in life. In some cases, adult relationships will be plagued with insecurity and anger. "If children do not get counseling when they need it," says Maribeth Price, "confusion and even isolation may result as they retreat within themselves for safety."

Carol is an example. When she was a young girl during the '60s, her sister and mother were killed in separate accidents. Because less was known then about the value of counseling for children and their need to process grief, the family never considered Carol's need to work through the pain of these significant losses. Instead, they believed that the best way to deal with the pain was to get on with their normal, everyday lives.

"So much of who I am and how I deal with pain, fear, and loss was formed by these tragedies that occurred in my early childhood," acknowledges Carol. For years, her relationships were marked by anger, fear, and a need to control. Not until decades after the tragic events did a counselor finally help Carol grieve the loss of her mother and sister and let go of the pain.

It's natural for parents to want their children to grow up trouble-free and emotionally healthy. But not all pain can be avoided.

Children are bound to experience—and should be expected to express—a full range of emotions in response to the celebrations and casualties of life.

If parents anticipate a disruption in the stability of the home, such as a marriage separation or a family member's death, Chuck Faber suggests they help prepare children in advance and address any confusion and fear that follows.

Ultimately, however, his best advice is this: Pray. "From Genesis to Revelation, God has provided examples of men and women who came to the end of their resources and discovered God there, ready to take them where they could not go themselves," he notes. Through prayer with and for their children, he says, parents will find "a sterling confidence in the truth of God's hand in our lives, equipping us to make it through the really tough times." ♦

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