

# Living through divorce

## CLINIC HELPS THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

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The end of a marriage is a life-changing event—all the more so when there are children involved. After the divorce you're left with the daunting challenge of getting your life back on track, but where do you start?

The Divorce Care program is a great first step. This ongoing 13-week program addresses the important questions asked by those navigating their lives back to a sense of normalcy.

The program is available in Gilroy, at both New Hope and South Valley community churches.

Gilroy residents Ray and Diane Evenson, facilitators at the New Hope program for the past four years, empathize with program participants, as they both experienced divorce before finding one another nearly 10 years ago.

"What I would recommend is to seek out divorce groups, Diane Evenson said, adding,

"We have it, South Valley has it. Because it helps. The people we have coming through our Divorce Care really want healing, they really want help, they really want knowledge on 'How do I get through this?'"

Transitioning into a new way of life is difficult enough, but dealing with this transition during the holidays, where family rituals may be altered, or disappear altogether, can be devastating to a child.

To minimize the impact it's important to sustain those routines in each

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home and, if possible, to have a similar structure in both households.

"The child has less transitions for them, and it's an easier transition, and the same applies to holidays," said Morgan Hill marriage and family therapist Kimberly Shannon.

According to Pete M. Collom, a Gilroy-based marriage, family and child therapist, the holiday season is an emotional tug of war for the children who are expecting the family traditions to continue.

"They're used to things being a certain way," Collom said. "So, what you really do is, you try and help them by preparing them ahead of time, 'this is how it's going to be.'"

He suggests you begin preparing and talking about the holidays a good three to four weeks in advance.

What could also prove beneficial for the child is including him or her in establishing the new home and new traditions.

In Evenson's experience with the Divorce Care program, as well as her own personal experience with her two sons, she's come to believe that how children handle the divorce depends on how their parents handle it.

Throughout the divorce process,

and after, Shannon instructs parents to follow one simple rule: "Put the children's feelings first."

Another key point to keep in mind, especially at family gatherings, parents should refrain from making negative or derogatory comments regarding other family members in front of the child, and ensure that extended family members follow their lead.

"It's super important for the emotional well-being of the child that there be neutrality," Shannon said.

Collom believes in trying to emphasize the positive during this time of transition, explaining to the child that maybe now there will be more peace in the family than there was before the divorce, and more one-on-one time with each parent.

As exciting as the holidays can be, they can also be a traumatizing time of year for them, according to Shannon, who compares the child's reaction to divorce, to that of the grief felt with the loss of a loved one.

"It's a loss. It's the loss of the family unit," Shannon said.

The child will need to go through the stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining and depression, before reaching the acceptance stage.

What adds to this loss is when parents continue to exist in conflict after the divorce.

"It's not about you, it's about the child," Shannon said, adding, "And what's in the best interest of the child."

Collom believes that especially during this time of transition, making time for your child is crucial.

"One of the biggest things that people don't realize is what a child sees, no matter what age, even as an adult, is really what I call abandonment," Collom said.

"If you can leave mom, and mom can leave you, you can leave me, and so [the child] runs for cover, they run to protect themselves. They begin to cover up, because in their own head they're saying, 'I can be left, too.'"

Collom suggests making "dates" with the child or children. "Make sure they have two or three times during the week, where a half an hour, it doesn't have to be a lot of time, but a half-hour minimum, is just spent one-on-one with that child."

For more information about the Divorce Care program and dates and locations of upcoming sessions, go to: <http://www.divorcecare.org/findagroup>.