

## When Parents Fight

By Christine Vander Wielen, M.S.W., CAPSW

Mindy tried to slip in the back door unnoticed. However, just as she was making her way upstairs, she was met by her mother. The exchange between them was brief, with mother finally asking, "do you want to invite some friends over this weekend?" Mindy simply answered, "no, I don't think so," and then she quickly escaped to her room. Her mother did not understand the shame she felt. Shutting the door behind her, Mindy sat on her bedroom floor. Tears welled up in her eyes and she shook ever so slightly; she would have only a few hours before her father came home. Her father's arrival was always bittersweet. She wanted him home but she knew along with him came the fighting, the criticizing, the belittling and the blaming between her parents. She wished they would just get along. There were never any broken dishes or black and blue marks left behind. Instead there were deep wounds left on Mindy's sense of belonging, sense of security, and on her relationships with her parents.

To Mindy, hearing her parents fight with each other so fiercely and so frequently was devastating. Children primarily develop their sense of belonging and sense of security from the relationships with their parents. When there is ongoing animosity between the parents, it is difficult for children to feel safe. Parental animosity can impact the emotional closeness between the parents and their children. For Mindy, to have a close relationship with either of her parents would mean to be disloyal to the other. The conflict between her parents is seen as being more powerful than the love and commitment of her parents.

The parents are the executives of the family and from their marital relationship all the other relationships in the family are derived. Children will often act in accordance with their perception of the marital relationship. Some children, like Mindy, will internalize the difficulties of the parents' marriage and report having difficulty concentrating at school, difficulty falling asleep and experience difficulty making friends. Other children will externalize the difficulties of their parents' marriage and report acting out at school or home purposely in an attempt to have the parents occupied with their behavior instead of fighting with each other. These children are all at increased risk to experience anxiety and depression, and to feel disconnected to others.

This is not to say that parents can never argue or disagree. When there is a "hot topic," a topic that frequently triggers intense emotions, discussions of this should be kept out of ear shot of children. Many partners are aware of their particular hot topics such as finances, in-laws, how leisure time will be spent, parenting issues and the like. Personal attacks and inappropriate language should always be avoided. Sometimes when there has been fighting in front of the children, the parents will resolve the issue in private. The children are left to assume that the issue remains unresolved and will often continue to experience the anxiety they

felt during the actual argument. For this reason, it can be beneficial for the parents to reassure the children that although they heard an argument, the situation was resolved.

If fighting is frequent and fierce, it may be beneficial to work with a well trained and experienced marriage and family therapist. A good therapist will not take sides but rather help both partners to communicate more effectively and constructively with one another. As parents learn to resolve conflict in Godly, healthy ways, their children are less likely to entertain catastrophic thoughts and assumptions about themselves or about their parents' marriage. Their own self-worth is held more intact, and their parents' love and commitment to one another is correctly seen as more powerful than the conflict.