

September 27, 2012

**PRESS RELEASE**

The Lawyers' Christian Fellowship recently hosted a special forum '*Preserving the Child in Brokenness*' featuring Dr. Pauline Milbourn-Lynch, child psychologist and author of *Caught in the Middle*, a book on children at the center of divorce. Supreme Court Justices, lawyers, and members of the public were present at the forum held at the St. Andrew High School for Girls on September 15, 2012.

Dr. Milbourn pointed out that regardless of whether the union was a conventional marriage or common-law marriage the impact on the children of divorce was still the same and great care was needed to preserve and protect the child(ren) in families that are going through divorce and custody issues. In her study of children of divorce in Jamaica it was found that all children were impacted by divorce regardless of their age. Babies often become upset and irritable, school-aged children tend to be prone to psychosomatic illnesses such as tummy aches and headaches and are often angry, afraid, and blame themselves for the breakup. Teens display anxiety, depression, have difficulty sleeping and often engage in negative behaviours.

Parents are not spared. Some divorced parents struggle with depression and many more also deal with significant anger, disappointment and shame about the divorce. Dr. Milbourn pointed out that parents also feel abandoned and unsupported when grieving a divorce. Many feel isolated from their church and faith communities as divorce is sometimes considered taboo.

**How to Help the Child?**

Dr. Milbourn recommends that parents break the news about the divorce to the child together. Special care must be taken to reassure the child that he/she is loved and that the divorce is not their fault. It is not necessary to go into all the details but tell the child the truth. Avoid arguing and using the child as a 'carrier pigeon'. Allow them to love the other parent. It is also important that all parties in the divorce seek counseling- both parents and the child or children involved. Communication with the child's school is also important as teachers are important care-givers to the child outside the home and are often the first to pick up on behaviours and symptoms affecting the child.

**Shared Custody Situations**

Shared custody often means that the child is a nomad moving from home to home. Often the child had part of their possessions (clothing, books, toys etc.) at one house or the other. It is not uncommon that a child is unprepared for some school or extra-curricular activity because they have forgotten maybe a swimsuit, or book, or some necessary tool at the other parents house. This situation provides very little structure for the child. Additionally challenges arise when parents have different parenting styles and the child is in a major state of flux. In this situation parents need to put in place systems to ensure that the special needs of the child are met and that the home environment is as stable as possible.

## **Resilience**

Of the children studied, Dr. Milbourn noted that resilient children were the ones who had high self-esteem, were hopeful with a positive attitude, felt special and appreciated, aware of their weaknesses and strengths and had the ability to set realistic goals. She encouraged parents to help their children develop these characteristics by making them feel special and by accepting them for who they are. Help them to set goals and discipline in a way that promotes self worth. It is also good to look for non-academic skills to help develop their confidence and to start building self-esteem and strengths.

## **Prevention is Best**

Prevention of divorce is still best. Dr. Milbourn pointed out that even though most churches offer pre-marital counseling very little attention is paid to counseling support for couples after the wedding. Counseling and mentorship should be offered to couples after getting married to help them cope with the ups and downs of marriage. If the marriage is beyond hope then staying in the marriage just because of the child does worse for the child. In cases where divorce is the only option, then Dr. Milbourn stresses the need for parents to understand the importance of protecting and preserving the child and that they seek counseling to help them cope with the stresses of divorce.

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