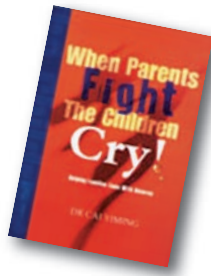


Reviewed by Dr Ong Say How



When Parents Fight, The Children Cry!

– Helping Families Cope with Divorce

Dr Cai Yiming

Clear and succinct reading guides on family issues are hard to come by. Some are overly technical, while others tend to be meandering. This short book on the effects of parental divorce on children and family marries the demand for such literature and the continuing efforts for restoring families.

Dr Cai Yiming, an authority figure in the field of Child Mental Health and Children Custody in Singapore, deserves credit for writing this timely book. With divorce rates climbing at an alarming rate in the United States (1 in 2 marriages ends in divorce), and now in Singapore (about 2 in 7 marriages), this issue could not be delegated to neglected corners of the family development agenda. Divorce or marriage breakdown is driven by several personal, interpersonal and societal forces. Some attribute it to lax social and moral values. Whatever the reasons, children inevitably shoulder the pain and agony of parental divorce.

Written in layman's terms, with appropriate usage of famous sayings and popular proverbs, topics on divorce are delivered to the point and in a down-to-earth manner. Valuable vignettes and tongue-in-cheek comments made by Dr Cai are a breath of fresh air.

The sequence of chapters allows readers to understand the ramifications of divorce on family life and on children. Proper emphasis was made on the emotional and psychological impact of divorce on children. Different perspectives were also drawn – how do fathers feel and what is the impact of divorce on fathers. Though the law tends to side the mother when it comes to child custody, particularly when the child is very young, the father has the right

to contest and negotiate for equal childcare responsibilities so that his contributions are valued. The book emphasises that despite the divorce, the child's position, in reference to his or her parents, has not changed. The use of the child as a 'pawn' for legal fights or for venting frustrations on the ex-spouse is adequately highlighted, suggesting that either parent could become oblivious to the child's needs as they face a legal battle with each other.

The merits of this book are obvious. Somehow, writing a book of such gravity is difficult. In overcoming that, it subconsciously portrays divorce and family issues in a simplistic manner. By no means is this the case in real life. A lot of legal battles and marriage break-ups are ugly and cruel. One must take into account that further elaboration on more complex issues is not the intent of this book. Perhaps a further chapter or another book specifically targeting professionals working with families would resolve this deficiency. Some additional topics could include training of family counsellors, research on impact of divorce on families, as well as studying protective factors that help keep married couples together.

After reading the book, one wonders if this small reference book could be made accessible to newly married couples or couples who are contemplating marriage. The reading of this book could be incorporated as part of a pre-marital counselling package to better prepare young adults for marriage and its potential 'problems'. This is not to suggest that all marriages are doomed to fail, but it may help create an awareness in the newlyweds and instil a sense of reality as they embrace their new life together. ■

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