

Coping with Summer Visitations

By: Carol Petro, LSW
Department for Marriage Family Ministry

Summer is a time when school comes to an end and going on vacations is a priority for most families.

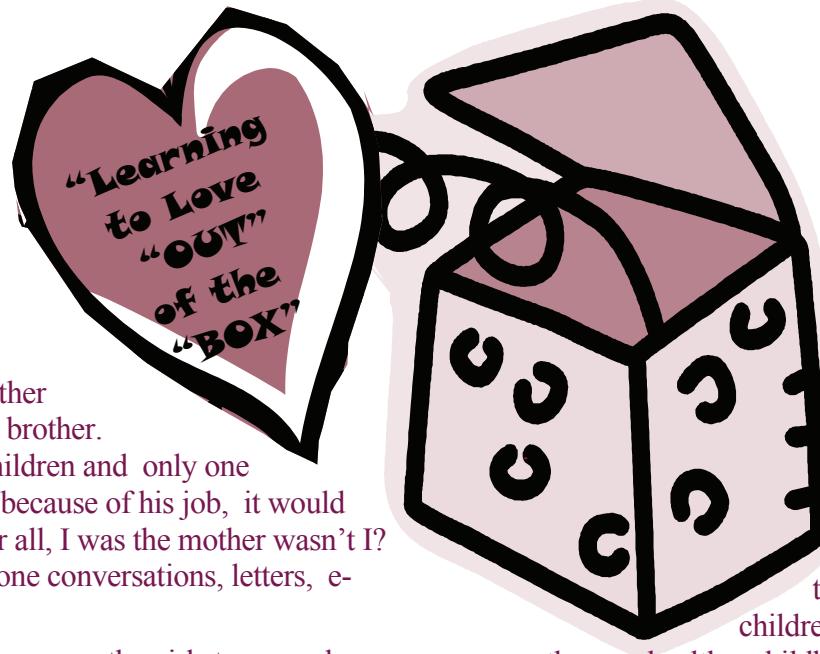
However, for families that are divorced, summer can take on a different note. That can mean children going across the country to see the other parent.

I just left the airport to put my two minor daughters on a plane to see their father who lives in California where they will spend two months with him and their brother.

In our family, the children were divided with me having to raise six of the children and only one child choosing to live with my ex-husband. After he had moved to California because of his job, it would become one of the most difficult things that I would ever have to accept. After all, I was the mother wasn't I? But, as a family, we had learned how to love each other from afar with telephone conversations, letters, e-mails and trips to Ohio.

This is my tenth year of doing this. I go through my usual routine of trying to prepare the girls two weeks ahead of time for the trip to their father. That means having to say goodbye to their friends with lots of overnight sleepovers the month before. By the time the day comes, I am exhausted from the shopping preparations and the birthday party that we always had to plan for my daughter whose birthday is a few days before the planned visitation. Then not to say about all of the preparation at the airport where you have to stand in line, making sure that all the details are in order for unaccompanied minors and my own pass so that I can see the girls off on the plane. Since I now am remarried, the girls' stepfather also is part of what we now call "The Great Departure" that is filled with mixed feelings from all of us of excitement, tears, bearing regrets of leaving, warm embraces and just plain acceptance of what their life has been. The Great Departure also means that at one point, only I, being the parent, can accompany the girls through security. That also entails leaving my husband alone in the ticket area to wait for me, and I being alone with my feelings of remorse of seeing my children that I love leave for two months. Divorce is not without its pain and it seems it is still ongoing in other ways even years later. It never ends....

The airport had been unusually busy today, and as I approached the gate for their flight, I noticed that there were many of us saying goodbye to our children.



After the children boarded, there was a group of us standing around waiting for the plane to take off. There were seven of us, six women and one man where we seemed to form our own group of support. All of us women had our Kleenex in our hands as eyes filled with tears as we were alone with our pain. As we struck a conversation amongst each other, we learned that each one of us had left some one back at the ticket area and each one of us had been divorced. One woman who was bitterly crying said that this was her first time and she did not know how she was going to survive this summer being alone. As we waited for the plane to take off, we all began to gather around and sat and talked about the different ways that we had handled this time of coping with the realities of divorce and our children. One thing that all of us in our small group agreed on was that the children's childhood was different. We had to work at providing them a healthy childhood and that sometimes means taking pains to readjust our schedules and working with the "other" parent to do this. We had to learn to change overnight and let go of the past for the sake of the kids. We talked about how hard this was to do since many of us were angry at what had happened to us and the whole process of divorce. The whole process of divorce changes lives forever especially the children. They are the ones left with the juggling game and we as parents need to help them with this. It is not easy for them and they sacrifice because they love both of us.

My thoughts went back to the conversations a few days before with my own daughters. "How do you feel", I asked them, "about the two different lives that you live.?" Now, they are 15 and 17 years old so they have been doing this since they were 5 and 7 years old. You would think that it was a way of life for them.

My 15 year old looked at me and said, "All my friends are involved in softball and swimming during the summer and I had never had the opportunity to do this. It is because I am not a resident of California, so I cannot join their teams where Dad lives and I am not here most of the summer. I miss my friends." My 17 year-old told me that she could not join in the activities at her high school, because she wasn't here for try-outs for volleyball or band. Now, she is working and she will not be able to work to earn money for a car that she wants. Yet, if they did not sacrifice these things, they would not be able to see their father whom they love. I asked them, "Can you think about some of the good things that you had experienced?" "Well, I supposed we had learned how to travel to various states," my 17 year old said. "We also have learned how to become independent and had to

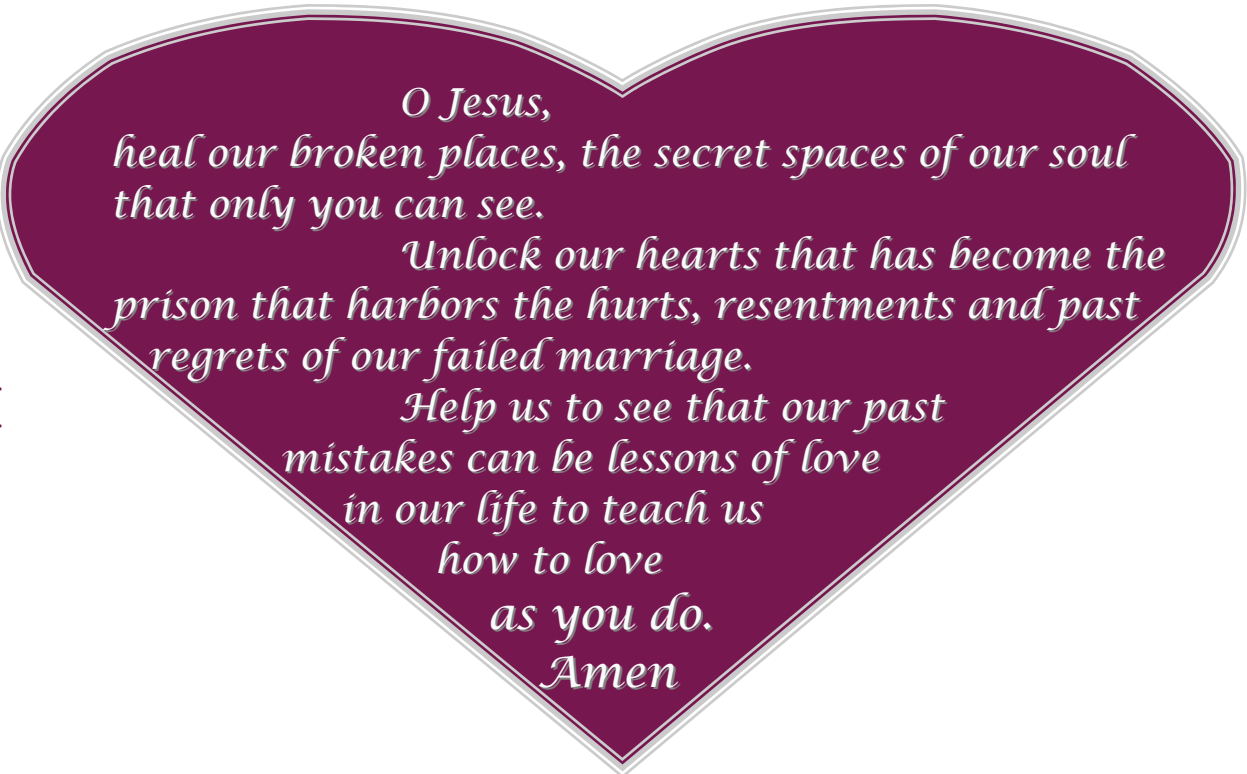
mature faster than some of our friends because of exposure to different types of cultures, climates and people in the United States.” As far as the juggling act of trying to adjust to both families, they said that it has taught them to become flexible and accepting of people’s differences. It meant that all of us had to create different ways of staying connected to both families. I guess you might say as a divorced family, it means **“learning to love out of the box”**.

Oftentimes, summer months for children of divorce entails traveling across country going to the other family where their world is different with different friends. To help our children transition from our world to the other parent’s world would involve having conversations with the other parent so that they could provide for swimming lessons, playing in the softball league or attending summer classes. This means that each family has to do some juggling so that our children can have those experiences. It is also interesting in the divorced family, the things that you and your ex-spouse fought about while married to each other, you have to try to resolve afterwards for the sake of the kids. For those that were married to spouses that were not Catholic, that can also mean hoping that the other parent will take the kids to Mass on Sunday while they are with them.

You are probably wondering what we told the newly divorced mother how to cope. We all agreed on one thing that she needed to change her thinking from “My children will not be with me this summer and what will I do?” to “What are some of the things that I always wanted to do but couldn’t?” We told her to try to turn her attitude around by taking the time to complete those tasks that are still written on her “To Do” lists. Or, she may want to take that long-deserved vacation with her friends. Perhaps, this is a time that she would like to take that course in photography or read the book that has been sitting on her nightstand. The group then turned to me and asked me what ways have I found that had helped me? I told them that at the present time we are a very large stepfamily of 11 kids, and we devote a lot of time to the children, so my husband and I take this time on doing things together as a couple that would rejuvenate our marriage. When I was a single mother, I had found that it was helpful to focus on turning this into a time of rejuvenating the spirit and enjoying summer so that I would be refreshed and renewed in spirit when the children would return home to me. We all watched the plane take off with our children for the summer quietly reflecting on those words of being refreshed and renewed in spirit.

I walked down the hallway of the airport and saw my husband talking to a rather large group of people. As I approached him, I noticed that he was also engaged in conversation with a group of people who were waiting for their family member who were sending off their children to the other parent. They were having their own conversations as being the extended family members trying to help those they love cope with the loss. In conversation, they all discovered that learning to love out of the box means learning to let go and let the other parent and family experience the love for their child too. Because when we do this, you are giving your child a gift in allowing them to love the other parent. It is another way of showing your child how you can practice the lessons of love and forgiveness in life that all of us are called to do as Christ has done for us.

Now, let’s go to the other side of the picture of the divorced family and that is what is the other parent and family feeling?...My children arrived in California safely and in the usual “they are safe” phone call to me, I decided to talk to my ex-spouse about his feelings of being the other parent. Despite the fact that I had remarried and he had chosen to remain single, in each of our own ways, we had tried over the years to become better parents to the children. However, we really avoided talking about how the decision to divorce has affected all of us, because we were all affected with the scars of our anger and bitterness in our marriage. Not a really good way to end a marriage and certainly not an example of following Christ’s love and forgiveness for us to the children. But, the years have taught us how to forgive. Divorce had taken its toll on him as well, and it has not been pleasant trying to parent from afar. He misses the kids and so he said that he looks forward to this time of year with such joy and anticipation. Over the last few months, he also had taken the time to prepare for their visit, planning to make their stay with him special with trips to Mexico, Big Bear Lake and Nevada as well as the great family fishing trip to the Pacific Ocean. In the years past, this would have included also spending a few weeks with the children’s grandparents in Carlsbad. But this year would be different as both had died in the past year. He would have the children all summer. Over the years through the eyes of the children, he said, he had learned to look at life differently. They had taught him how to love because he had to learn the lesson of love through the lesson of loss.



*O Jesus,
heal our broken places, the secret spaces of our soul
that only you can see.
Unlock our hearts that has become the
prison that harbors the hurts, resentments and past
regrets of our failed marriage.
Help us to see that our past
mistakes can be lessons of love
in our life to teach us
how to love
as you do.
Amen*