

How to ruin your child's chance of a happy love life: Have an affair - and the damage is WORSE the older they are when you stray

By Kate Figes

For an explosive new book examining why infidelity has become so common in modern Britain, relationships expert Kate Figes spent three years talking to unfaithful spouses, psychologists and marriage counsellors.

Here, continuing our serialisation, she reveals the devastating and enduring effect that an affair can have on children...

Look around today and in many ways modern parents have never been so tuned into their children's needs. They know that to thrive, children require enough sleep, additive-free food, and stimulation through the best educational toys, sports, music and after-school activities.

Yet, all too often, parents fail to provide what their offspring need most: a constructive and loving relationship between the only two parents a child will ever have.



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Lifelong pain: Regardless of the age of a child with a cheating parent, the emotional stress will create scars that may never heal

Over the past three years, I've interviewed experts and talked to dozens of men and women who have experienced (or are still having) affairs. What resonated most for me was the emotional fall-out on the young. There's something badly wrong with society when we put our entitlement to sexual stimulation and release above the needs of our children. If we then rush into a separation or divorce, we fail them at least as much as we fail ourselves.

Jean Duncombe, a sociologist who has conducted extensive research on the subject, says: 'I'm puritanical when someone tells me they're having an affair — because of the work we've done on the impact of divorce on the children. 'If people say to me that the children don't know, I say: "Are you sure?" or "Think about what you're doing to the children" — and I never would have said that 20 years ago.' For parents who have affairs are not only lying to their partners, they are often deceiving themselves about the impact their infidelity can have on their offspring.

Badly kept: Many adulterers claim their children to not know they are having a secret affair but a child may sense emotional turmoil in other ways

'The children are too young to understand what's happening,' they reason. 'In any case, it doesn't concern them. And children are resilient.'

All of the evidence points to the contrary. People don't just betray their partners when they shatter family life with a serious affair — the sad truth is that their children grow up believing their parents have been unfaithful to them, too. There is substantial research on the short and long-term effects of divorce if it isn't handled well.

For children, these include low self-esteem, a sense of being abandoned, poor performance at school, anti-social behaviour and the heartbreak of simply missing the absent parent. Separations provoked by an affair tend to be the most acrimonious. Each parent shoves the blame for the split on to the other, sometimes forcing the children to take sides by supporting his or her version of events. By tearing a child's loyalty in two, parents can inflict profound damage. To make matters worse, research has shown that around half of all fathers lose contact with their offspring within two years of the separation.

CAN SONS INHERIT A FATHER'S INFIDELITY GENE?

IF A PARENT had an affair when the children were small, you would not expect it to affect them significantly when they have grown up. But two studies, focusing on the same group of children over the course of 25 years, have raised worrying questions about the ability of those affected to form their own lasting relationships.

'Contrary to what we've long thought, the major impact of divorce does not occur during childhood or adolescence,' says psychologist Judith Wallerstein, who co-authored the studies. 'Rather, it increases over time and rises to a crescendo in adulthood.

'It affects personality, the ability to trust, expectations about relationships and the ability to cope with change.'

Some find it so hard to trust a partner that they never settle down at all. Yet, those who lose a parent through death are not affected in this way.

Many adult children of divorced parents become promiscuous, more accepting of short-term or multiple relationships, and more likely to separate sexual pleasure from emotions.

Couples counsellor Liza Glenn automatically asks clients who have had an affair whether one of their parents did, too — 'and it usually is the case'.

Men whose fathers were unfaithful are the most likely to stray, according to research at Charles University in Prague. Psychoanalyst Brett Kahr says: 'It's hard for him not to be seriously tempted — out of identification with the father and also out of a wish to compete with him.'

Past arguments or violence in the family home have an effect, too. As adults, these children are more likely to experience greater extremes of anger in their relationships — and they more prone to embark on affairs.

An acrimonious divorce, according to research, doesn't simply hurt children at the time; it can also store up problems for their future.

So, even if their parents separated when they were small, they won't necessarily suffer the full effects until they become adults themselves.

It can contribute to their own marital problems — including affairs of their own — or hamper their ability to form lasting relationships.

Lesley was a schoolgirl when her mother discovered her husband had been having an affair with a work colleague. Most of the couple's friends already knew, so the humiliation was searing. They had to move to another town — which meant Lesley leaving not only her home, but also her school and her friends. 'I still find it hard to trust that when my boyfriend's late or not with me and doesn't answer his phone, that he's doing what he says he's doing,' she says.

'It's as if disaster is always waiting in the wings and he's going to leave me — even though all this happened when I was eight and I'm now 28.'

Of course, the last thing people involved with the thrill of having an affair are likely to think about is how their actions will play with the next generation.

When an affair is discovered, both parents are so anxious, angry and even traumatised that they have limited resources for dealing with more stress from their children, who are likely to be more demanding than usual. In some families, sons and daughters are sucked into the emotional vortex. In others, they are given little by way of explanation other than: 'Mummy and Daddy aren't getting on very well at the moment.' Lily says her adult children find it hard to trust and respect their father because he lied to them as children and still denies he had an affair with the woman to whom he's now married. 'My son went through a very bad time as a teenager, drinking too much and running away,' she says. 'Both children mind to this day that my ex has never come clean about what really happened. My daughter hasn't settled down with anyone yet — she doesn't trust that it could last. My son, who's married, once asked me if I thought infidelity might be in his genes because of the fact his father was serially unfaithful.

'He seriously considered not getting married at all because he didn't want to risk hurting his girlfriend in the way that he'd been hurt.'

So, is there any way of lessening the impact on children? Yes, but only in cases where parents behave responsibly, putting their children's interests first. All the research shows that several specific things need to happen if they're to stand a hope of recovering quickly. First, if there are marital arguments, parents must never descend into aggression and character assassination. Instead, children need to see that their father and mother can argue their corner, respect the other's right to have another opinion, talk about the impact of their behaviour and resolve to work on their differences. Second, if a couple separate, they need to present a united front when dealing with the children. So, there should be no arguments about access in front of them and both parents should be involved in school activities and their lives.

Third, any stress, humiliation and rage must be unloaded far away from the children. It may take Herculean strength to avoid revealing your most negative feelings, but it's essential. Use a family mediator (nfm.org.uk) to limit the acrimony and sort out your separation more civilly. Fourth, it's important not to damage children's trust. This means telling the truth about what's going on by giving them information appropriate to their age — and answering direct questions. This will reassure them the infidelity wasn't their fault and that they can always ask more questions when they're worried.

Yes, affairs happen. But if we're grown-up enough to have children, we owe it to them to deal with the fallout in a grown-up fashion.

That way, we can avoid handing problems to the next generation — problems that can strike different age groups in diverse but equally damaging ways...

UNDER FIVE



Early harm: A young child will respond to the increased tension at home by crying

When a parent is absorbed by an affair, no amount of pretence can disguise the fact they have less emotional energy for their children. At the same time, there are rows and tensions at home. Sensing their parents' withdrawal, babies and small children feel anxious and resort to their only weapon: crying. Their frequent tears are a desperate plea for more eye contact, more cuddling, more attention. However, their parents are likely to be so wrapped up in their own emotions they find it difficult to respond. For children under three, this can be catastrophic. At this stage, it's crucial for them to be totally enveloped by passionate parental adoration.

If they miss out, they become anxious — and years later, when they become adults, they may have problems with intimacy.

AGED FIVE TO TEN

Over the age of five, children are more likely to think they have caused their parents' difficulties themselves. Their greatest fear, when they hear arguments and sense tension at home, is that their parents will separate. As a consequence, they often have nightmares. Before going to sleep, they can also experience powerful flashbacks of Mummy and Daddy fighting. Many become over-clingy.

Behavioural problems at school are common, as well as other regressive behaviour, such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking.

To young children, separation makes no sense. Without a clear understanding of why it's happened, they find their world has been thrown into chaos.

It's not uncommon for one parent to be involved with the father or mother of another pupil at the child's primary school. So, once the affair is out in the open, it can cause profound disruption to a child's social world. Imagine what it must feel like suddenly to see your own father picking up someone else's children from your school or giving them presents. I've heard examples of both.

AGED 11-18

During the first rumblings of adolescence, things start to get considerably more complicated. For a start, teenagers are more likely to discover an infidelity — not least because they're so adept at finding incriminating evidence on mobile phones and computers.

And when they do suspect or discover something, they often don't know where to turn. In adolescence, children are developing their own sense of identity and fumbling their way towards first love. They can often be idealistic, highly moral and sensitive to hypocrisy. So when they find out that one parent has been unfaithful, they're quick to see the betrayer as a liar and a cheat.



Discovering: An adolescent child is more likely to find evidence of an infidelity, especially as this generation is so at home with technology and social media

This will hurt the parent, but it's also harmful to the child. In order to grow up well, adolescents desperately need their parents to be role models — particularly when it comes to demonstrating the values of integrity, honesty and sensitivity towards loved ones. They need a stable family from which they can gradually start to pull away in order to forge their own separate lives. The discovery of an affair explodes all that.

To make matters worse, some teenagers are forced to bear the weight of family secrets by acting as go-betweens. Both parents may use their child as a confidant as they struggle to construct new lives apart. Many adolescents get very angry, usually with the parent with whom they feel most secure — who is also probably the one being betrayed and least able to cope.

They can get into more trouble at school, have fights, start fires or play truant. Some become depressed, get sick, stop eating or turn to drink or drugs. Meanwhile, given that the idea of their parents having sex at all is pretty disturbing, the discovery that one of their parents is having sex outside the marriage feels like a violation. Consequently, some teenagers become promiscuous at an early age, while others opt to shut down sexually altogether. A parent's affair also causes problems in the community or at school, because teenagers are highly sensitive about how they are viewed.

Bigger kids, bigger problems: Even older teens and young adults can be scarred for life and display destructive behaviour

When the straying partner is the father, the child's sense of betrayal may be mitigated by the general consensus that it's still considered more excusable for a man to have an affair.

But if a mother has been having an affair, her children are likely to encounter a new torture: hearing her labelled — by schoolchildren who echo their parents' remarks — as a 'slag' or a 'whore'.

AGED 18-21

Even when a child has left home or gone to university, the discovery of a parent's infidelity can have far-reaching consequences.

Sociologist Jean Duncombe says: 'Some parents seem to think that once their children have gone to university, it doesn't matter any more because they're adults.

'But they're still children within that context. So they're absolutely devastated. It's the lies, I think, that cause the deepest damage.'

For some, the disruption to their sense of security is acute enough to prevent them sustaining relationships at all.

But one of the more common reactions — which is rising — is to become rigidly condemnatory of any sexual betrayal. This moral certainty sets an impossibly high standard for young people in their love lives. Indeed, people with zero tolerance for infidelity are likely to be less able to deal with the consequences of marital difficulties and more likely to end partnerships that could be saved or even improved.