

How Children Are Impacted By Marital Infidelity



Although the effects of marital infidelity on children is an explosive subject that touches millions of homes, it is rarely considered or discussed. But whether a child is six, sixteen, or twenty-six, when his parents sexually betray each other, he is left with a host of psychological issues that can plague him for the rest of his life.

Whatever their age, children whose parents have been unfaithful often react with intense feelings of anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, sadness, and confusion. They might act out, regress, or withdraw. They may feel pressured to win back the love of the cheating parent or to become the caretaker of the betrayed parent. And when an adult child's family baggage includes lies, cheating, and the breaking of promises, he may have a particularly hard time navigating the

rough waters of dating and marriage. The bottom line is that when parents are role models of infidelity, their children can't help but react.

Every family is different, each child is unique, and yet there are certain common responses to parental infidelity that most children experience. The more than 800 respondents to the Parents Who Cheat Survey, as well as the many clients I have treated over the years, have confirmed that the following are core responses experienced by sons and daughters of every age—from young children to adults—once they find out that one or both of their parents has been sexually unfaithful.

- **Loss of trust** - When children of any age learn of a parent's infidelity, they usually find it extremely difficult if not impossible to trust that someone they love will not lie to them, reject, or abandon them. They very often learn not to put their faith in love, and they may also learn that they are not worthy of receiving monogamous love.
- **Shame** - A child may feel as if the betraying parent's sexual transgression is a black mark against himself and the rest of the immediate family. And if the child has been pressured by the cheating parent to "keep the secret" of infidelity from the betrayed parent, the child is left with the added and unwarranted burden of guilt.
- **Confusion** - When marriage includes infidelity, children often draw the conclusion that marriage is a sham and love an illusion. And when parents stay married even when one or both parent(s) continues having affairs, the effect on children is profound confusion about the meaning of both love and marriage.
- **Anger and ambivalence toward the betraying parent** - When infidelity partially defines a parent's character, a son or daughter often feels torn between feelings of anger and yearning. Some even express this emotional conflict in terms of there being two mothers or two fathers—the one who used to be their parent (and was deserving of their love) and the one who was revealed when the infidelity was brought to light (and whom they now "hate").

- **Resentment toward the betrayed parent** - Some children resent the betrayed parent for requiring them to be their emotional caretaker, for under-parenting due to preoccupation with the infidelity drama, or for having been unable to prevent the infidelity in the first place.
- **Acting out** - Rather than confronting sad, angry, or confusing feelings directly, children may exhibit behavioral problems during childhood, sexual acting out during adolescence, and intimacy avoidance or sexual addiction during adult years. Issues of promiscuity may arise in an attempt to play out what a child perceived from his parents about the casualness of sex and the impermanence of love.

Of course none of these responses are what parents intend for their children to go through. But children are generally not the focus when the decision is made to have an affair. What my clients and the hundreds of survey respondents confirm, however, is that when the betrayer and the betrayed are also parents, marital infidelity is never a private affair.

The Parents Who Cheat Survey

Our survey is not a scientific study, as there was no control group and our method of acquiring survey respondents did not ensure a sampling that is necessarily representative of the general population. Survey respondents were solicited via the Internet, by invitation through a website, or by receiving an e-mail. Nevertheless, reaching out to potential respondents in this fashion was an efficient way of collecting information from a large number of people whose parents had cheated and who agreed to answer questions concerning their attitudes, values, beliefs, and past behavior pertinent to parental infidelity.

More than 800 adult children whose parents were unfaithful responded to our online Parents Who Cheat Survey. 75.7% of respondents reported that they felt betrayed by the parent who cheated. 88.4% felt angry toward their cheating parent. 62.5% felt ashamed or embarrassed to talk about their parent's infidelity with friends or other people. 80.2% felt that their attitudes toward love and relationships was influenced by their parent having cheated, and 70.5% said their ability to trust others had been affected. 83% stated that they feel people regularly lie.

One of the most striking findings in the survey is that while 86.7 % of respondents said they believe in monogamy, and 96 % said they don't believe that cheating is okay even if one's partner doesn't find out, nearly half—44.1%—have been unfaithful themselves. I did not interview every respondent; however, based on the interviews I did conduct, as well as the explanatory section at the end of the survey, most of those who were unfaithful were unfaithful during the first stages of their relationship, after which time they realized that infidelity did not resolve their problems nor did it fulfill their emotional needs.

Being exposed to parental infidelity provokes intense insecurity in children and adult children and thus may create the need to resolve unfinished emotional business by engaging in the same pattern of behavior. Many adult children whose parents had been unfaithful repeat the same behavior as a way to act out, understand, and/or overcome what took place between their parents. So, although these particular statistics tend to indicate a contradiction between respondents' attitudes and their behavior, it is my belief that their own unfaithfulness was an attempt to work through their feelings concerning their parents' infidelity.

Further statistics on gender reactions, as well as additional observations and conclusions from the Parents Who Cheat Survey, can be found in my book, ***Parents Who Cheat: How Children and Adults are Affected When Their Parents Are Unfaithful*** (HCI 2009).

Visit www.ananogales.com for more information.