

# Effects Of Divorce On Children

*Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service*

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We see the little nine year old girl coming to school each day looking sad and troubled. She begins to withdraw from her classmates. The enthusiasm and interest she held for school is beginning to wane. In another classroom, an eleven year old boy is noticed because he is becoming more disruptive. He challenges his teacher's authority and fails to heed her warnings to him about his behavior. Occasionally he initiates fights on the playground. Generally he is becoming disruptive with some of the other students. The effects of divorce on these, some of the smallest of God's children, are causing grave concern among us. We realize that not only the child's emotional and intellectual development can be impaired, but more importantly, the spiritual welfare of the child is often negatively affected as well.

The word "divorce" is merely a legal term. But to children, the real meaning of divorce is the deterioration of relationships in the family, the physical splitting of the family, the loss of security, and feelings of hopelessness. Many harmful conditions and dynamics exist in the families where the marriage has deteriorated. Lines of parental authority become cloudy. Destructive alliances of family members form against each other. Roles become confused. Family members turn their attention towards self preservation, leaving less caring and nurturing for each other. The basic needs that our Creator intended humans to have met through families remain unmet and pain and emptiness abound.

Such dynamics and conditions may also exist in families which are intact. The consequences of sin are evident in everyone's life and family relationships. We realize that God's grace alone is responsible for any success we have as parents and spouses, or any measure of love and understanding we received as children. Therefore, let us remember as we consider the topic of THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN, that single parents, by divorcing, need our compassion and understanding. Being a Christian single parent in today's world, whether caused by death or divorce, is a task of great proportion.

During our discussion of the injurious effects of divorce on children, we must not lose sight of the power of the Holy Spirit in young lives. With the Lord's help, being a child in a family where divorce has occurred is not an insurmountable obstacle to developing into a mature Christian adult.

Turning our attention towards the specific effects of divorce on children, we begin by remembering that these effects are a result of a departure from God's divine order for the family. These effects have a much deeper and more important impact on children which reaches deeper than the immediate observable behavior they may display now. A child's perception of the world, his values, self-concept, and relationship with God can all be altered by the breakup of the family.

From birth until the early twenties, people experience dynamic change in growth and development. In each particular stage, the child sees the world in a particular manner. Different levels of intellectual, social, and emotional development affect how children will react to a divorce while they are in a particular stage of development. Using these developmental stages as a framework, we will see how divorce specifically affects children at each stage.

## *Stage By Stage Consideration*

Babies come into the world helpless and dependent upon their parents. Between birth and the age of two, children begin to form a very fundamental and important attachment to their parents, particularly their primary caretaker, who is most often the mother. This close attachment helps to create a feeling of trust between the child and parent. The child trusts that the parent will take care of his needs.

### *Ages 0 - 3*

Between birth and the age of three, divorce is felt indirectly through the distress experienced by the custodial parent, usually the mother. If a mother who is parenting a baby or toddler is feeling depressed about the breakup of her

marriage, this depression will affect her relationship with her child. Perhaps she might lack the energy and enthusiasm to be actively involved with her child. The child may feel as though the parent is less interested in him or is rejecting him. If this occurs between birth and two years of age, the child may not establish that bond of trust with the mother that is essential for creating emotional stability. A child at this age is beginning to learn how to give love and receive love, two very important dynamics in any close relationship. If the bond is not established, and the child feels somewhat unattached and anxious about the lack of bonding, this may be transferred to other relationships as the child grows. It may be difficult for the child to have a close relationship with other adults, and also peers. During this age period, it is very difficult to attach observable behavioral effects to the breakup of the family. Children under the age of three have little or no memory of family conflict, and they are not able to accurately describe their feelings and attach them to events in the past. This means that children may be affected by divorce, but may not be able to identify the trauma that they have experienced during those first years. A general effect that we would see in children whose parents divorced while the child was under the age of three might be that the child would have difficulty establishing close relationships with people and might not trust them as readily as others their age do. A child who shares little of his feelings and has a tendency to underreact to stressful situations might be wary of sharing himself with other people.

### *Ages 3 - 5*

The preschoolers between the ages of three and five have some very definite and important changes taking place. These years are actually a working drawing for many of the adolescent issues. During these years, a child's conscience begins to develop and thus there is an emphasis on the child evaluating himself as good or bad. They also are egocentric and have a difficult time seeing events having resulted from anything but their behavior or their relationship with other people.

The very important sex role identity process is beginning to take place at this time. Boys and girls start to see themselves as being different from each other and aligning their identity as males or females. For girls, this process is a bit easier because of their close attachment with their mothers and the natural sex role identification with their mothers. Boys, on the other hand, are most likely attached to their mothers due to the close and nurturing and maternal care they have received, but now have to switch their identities from their mothers to their fathers. This is a very crucial step in a person's development and divorce has many implications for this sex role identity establishment.

Many times, arguments between parents prior to a divorce are centered around the parenting of the children. It is inevitable that parents will disagree about some parenting issues. It is also very probable that if their relationship is not satisfying, the differences that they have in regard to raising children will be accentuated. Children hearing these arguments often believe that they personally are the cause of the arguments and eventually the breakup of the marriage. The fact that one parent leaves the home is more proof for the children that they have caused the breakup. Children see the parent leaving the home as leaving them rather than leaving the marriage.

Boys who see their fathers leave are left in a position where they lack the intensive contact that is needed for them to establish firmly their sex role identity with their father. Questions may also arise for them as to their father's acceptance of them if they feel that he has abandoned them. Or if they, for some reason, believe that their father has been forced to leave the home, boys may develop a fear that they, because of their maleness, are also expendable to the remaining family members.

Some boys at this age will react with a heightened physical and verbal aggression toward family members and peers. Both boys and girls will experience a feeling of low self-esteem due to the seeming rejection of the non-custodial parent. Denial may become a common form of defense against their feelings. The pain of the separation from the non-custodial parent may be so great that the child may wish to deny his feelings towards himself and towards the others around him. Some children may also attempt to be the best behaved child so that they can please their parents and bring the family together. If they believe that it was their bad behavior that caused problems in the family, they will believe that their good behavior can solve these problems and make people in the family happy once again.

Some very important spiritual issues need to be considered for this age group. At this time in life, it is very difficult for children to form a clear image of God and to differentiate God from their parents. The concept of God as their heavenly Father is also enmeshed with the concept of their earthly father. They see both of their

"fathers" as being very strong and capable. If their father leaves them during divorce, they may think that their heavenly Father will also leave them. Thus, if they begin to lose trust in their earthly father, they may question the reliability and permanence of their heavenly Father. Hearing that their heavenly Father hates sin and disciplines his children may lead a child to believe that the problems in the family are a way God is punishing them for their sins.

### *Ages 6 - 8*

Between the ages of six and eight, children normally are beginning to focus their efforts on learning, moving toward more independence from their families, and firming their identities and concepts. They have not begun to mount a serious challenge to their parents' authority and yet are beginning to be capable of taking care of some of their own personal needs. Parents can find it very exciting at this time to watch their children begin to investigate the environment and start to reason and think abstractly.

Even though the child is beginning to view himself as part of a larger world, he continues to rely on and appreciate the security provided by his parents.

The breakup of the family is interpreted as a collapse of that protective environment. Being emotionally immature and still subject to primitive fears, the child begins to feel as though his survival is threatened. He may also perceive that the loss of one parent implies the imminent loss of the other. As one eight year old boy said, "I thought that if my father left, my mother would also leave."

The child who had the potential to be a happy, inquisitive, enthusiastic child entering school can regress and act much like the preschool child. Blaming himself and his bad behavior remains a common thought among children this age. Such a feeling of responsibility for the outcome of the family might prompt a child to undertake many ill-fated attempts to solve the problem. Some children may attempt to be perfect in order to please both parents and give them a reason for being together again. Another child might become sick in order that the parents reunite because of their concern for the child's health. The failure of such attempts to reunite the parents often causes the children to adopt a hopeless attitude toward the future.

With the child being preoccupied with the welfare of the family, beginning school can be a very frustrating experience. Unable to concentrate, the new student is unable to learn and master the new knowledge and skills during the first couple of years. As other classmates advance, and a noticeable difference begins to appear between students, the child who fails to master the new skills will begin to see himself as not having the ability to do well in school and may label himself as "dumb." This begins to lay the foundation for what we often refer to as a poor self-image. So besides feeling helpless about the family situation, the child is also faced with failing to measure up to the performance of his peers.

### *Ages 9 - 12*

Children between the ages of nine and twelve begin to distance themselves from their family dependence. They are able to gratify themselves more and more by activities outside their families. Their sense of self-worth is developed through such avenues as school, sports, and their social life. Being able to reason more accurately and see themselves as separate from their parents, children at this age will begin to understand divorce as their parents' problem. At this stage, anger about the divorce is often directed at the parents. The child's strict sense of fairness and being a team player is contradicted by the parents going their separate ways and being uncooperative with each other. According to the child, the parents are not abiding by the rules.

Therefore, one of the most prominent reactions a child at this age has to deal with is anger. Oftentimes this anger is channeled into many other aspects of the child's life. At times, children use their anger as a defense against feelings of shock and depression. Anger often spills into the classroom setting in the form of disruptive behavior. Boys, in particular, express their anger in such a manner. The anger could also be directed at one parent, as the child is beginning to make a judgment as to who was right and who was wrong in the divorce. This choosing of a "good" and "bad" parent frequently leads to guilt and depression. It is very difficult for a child to label a parent as bad and maintain anger towards the parent without eventually feeling guilty about the anger.

Feelings of shame, resentment, rejection and loneliness are also felt by children in this stage. They feel shame because they identify themselves with the family and see the family as breaking up and being unsuccessful. They resent what the parents are doing to their family. Rejection is felt as they believe that if the parents really loved them, they would make more of an effort to solve their problems and keep the family together. Loneliness comes from spending less time with the parents and having parents pay less attention to their children during the breakup of the family.

Preadolescents react with a lot of energy and action towards divorce. These feelings are often acted out and at times are directed at parents. Eventually, children might feel exhausted because they have vented all their feelings in their attempts to keep the family together with little success.

### *Ages 13 - 17*

Divorce exaggerates and blurs the developmental tasks of adolescence. Change is rapid during the adolescent years. Physical growth spurts occur and sexual development becomes the prominent influence in the adolescents' lives. They also are attempting to establish their individual identities separate from their families. Adolescents vacillate between feelings of omnipotence and feeling of helplessness and dependency.

A few teens can understand that divorce is their parents' problem. These few have enough confidence at this point to bolster their self-esteem from other relationships and activities. This, however, seems to be the exception to how adolescents react to their parents' divorce.

Teenagers might perceive the departure of one parent as personal abandonment causing an exaggerated expectation of rejections in other relationships. This thought could cause problems in social and dating relationships. Girls, for instance, might believe that most boys will reject them because they felt their father rejecting them when he left home. Their confusion about the nature of men might further be confused if their father left their mother and was known to be seeing another woman.

The effects from a badly resolved divorce in years previous to adolescence can also jump to the forefront. For instance, the boy who lost his father through divorce at age four might now be a teenager struggling to establish his male identity. He may not have had enough contact with his father between the time of his parents' divorce and his adolescent years to establish a strong male identity. Therefore, he may feel a pressing need to prove that he is a man when he is still an adolescent. This type of thought might lead to attaching his identity to public figures such as rock stars, movie stars or professional athletes. If the message he receives from these men that he observes from a distance is that you need to be tough and "macho" to be a man, he may attempt to act that way. Oftentimes, he would then become boisterous and aggressive in trying to establish himself as a young adult male.

Normally adolescents have more sensitive feelings than either children or adults. The adolescent girl who has just been told by her boyfriend that he wants to break up with her can feel like the world is coming to an end. The divorce of parents can put the adolescent's feelings on a roller coaster. Adolescents often feel a need to escape from their strong feelings. They may resort to drugs, alcohol, overly aggressive behavior or sexual promiscuity as a way of dealing with those deep feelings.

The adolescent is also beginning to make decisions about the future. This can cause many problems if the adolescent is not in a stable home environment where parents can be good role models and guide the teenager. The teenagers may feel alone in making decisions and may make decisions too rapidly without considering the consequences. Many teenage marriages have occurred because young people feel alienated from their family and seek to find someone who will listen to them and care about them. On the other end of the spectrum, teenagers may feel overly responsible for their parents. They feel they must stay at home to take care of the parent who is left home and actually may assume the role of the spouse who has left. These pseudo-mature teenagers are prime candidates for depression in later years. They find out that they have given up many important experiences during that period of time in their lives by having assumed too much responsibility. The worst discovery is that their heroic

attempts were to no avail, as they were not able to meet the needs of family members as only the absent parent/spouse could.

### *A Case Example*

Sharing an actual story about a teenager and how the divorce of her parents nine years ago still affects her will shed more light on some of the ideas previously presented:

Robin is 17 years old. Her parents divorced when she was 8 years old, and her mother remarried when she was 11. Presently, she has little contact with her father who lives some distance away. She describes her father as being somewhat irresponsible and "like a teenager himself." She enjoys hearing from him but feels let down by his unreliability. She attempts, at times, to downplay her father's irresponsibility by humorizing. Other times, she feels very hurt because her father does not follow through on his promises to see her and does not initiate as many contacts as she would like with him. She fantasizes about her relationship with her father and believes that if she and her father were together, they could have a good life.

Her relationship with her stepfather has gone from initially being close and nurturing to recently becoming very stormy. Her stepfather has three children who live with his ex-wife. He admittedly does not have a close relationship with them and wanted to make sure that he had a good relationship with Robin. Therefore, during the first four years that they were together, he took Robin under his wing and was very supportive of her. She responded positively to him. Now, however, she and her stepfather have a strained relationship due to a conflict concerning her boyfriend. Her stepfather does not approve of her boyfriend and she has committed herself to him. Her relationship with her mother has been also one of closeness alternating with conflict. Robin believes that she was very supportive to her mother after the divorce. In fact, she remembers people telling her what a "big girl" she was after the divorce because she acted so mature for her age and tried to be as helpful to her mother as she could be. But as the conflict between Robin and her stepfather grew, a conflict between her and her mother also began. At times, she felt as though her mother was siding with her stepfather over the issue of her boyfriend. At other times, she thought that her mother really did not have the right to give her advice about her life.

As a result of this conflict, Robin had left home and was living at her boyfriend's parents' home. She was still attending high school and working at a part-time job. She and her boyfriend had many plans to marry and were eager to start a family of their own.

Robin has intimated that she feels very insecure at times. She knows that other people have been telling her for the last few years that she is a mature and reliable person, but at this point she feels as though she cannot handle some of the pressures of her life. She acknowledges that she took care of her mother after the divorce because she felt as though her mother needed someone to take care of her. Being very insightful about herself, she is beginning to wonder what it will be like for her ten years from now if she follows through with marrying her boyfriend immediately upon graduating from high school. She thinks there may be a chance that being married so early and starting a family may cause her to feel she has missed part of her childhood. Although she can construct this type of scenario for herself, at the present time she can see no alternatives but to marry her boyfriend. She feels as though she needs some security in her life and wants to have a stable and happy family. Because she cannot have that with her mother and her stepfather, or her father, she must construct this family herself.

Robin's story points out that divorce not only affects children in the stage of development that they are at when the divorce occurs, but it also may affect them in further stages and throughout their lives. In Robin's case, she had felt a void in her life for years and as she went through adolescence, she saw an opportunity to make a decision on her own to fill that void.

There are as many different stories and variations on how divorce affects children as there are children. Although there are some patterns that can be identified, divorce does not affect every child in exactly the same manner. There are, however, some factors which affect the adjustment of a child to divorce which seem to be common in all divorces.

## ***Factors In Adjustment***

The relationship between the child and the non-custodial parent is a very critical relationship. The better the relationship is with the non-custodial parent throughout and after the divorce, the better the adjustment for the child will be. The more consistent the non-custodial parent is in maintaining contact with the child, the more stable an influence in that child's life that parent is, the better the adjustment for that child. If a non-custodial parent neglects the child or fails to maintain promises about seeing the child, it will be more difficult for the child to adjust to the breakup of the family. Without an on-going relationship, children may feel as though the non-custodial parent is abandoning them and may take responsibility for the divorce because they feel they were the cause.

Another factor is the type of relationship the parents maintain with each other after the divorce. If the relationship continues to be conflictual and the parents are unable to cooperate on issues related to the children, negative effects of the divorce will linger. At times, children may be used as messengers between the divorced parents to carry information which the parents are not willing to communicate directly to their ex-spouse. Children may even be used as spies to keep the spouses informed about their ex-spouse's new companions or lifestyle. It is not uncommon for the children to become a symbol of control. Some people retaliate or try to get even with their spouse by refusing to cooperate in raising the children. To continually disagree with the former spouse and suggest contrary solutions to problems with the children can be a way of making life miserable for them. In essence, this is an attempt to make them pay the price for the wrongs committed in the marriage. Children become the victims of their parents' unwillingness to forgive and put past hurts behind them. As grim and pessimistic a commentary the information in this paragraph may seem, it happens over and over again. The quiet and cooperative divorce in which both parents work together harmoniously for the good of the children is only a pipe dream contrived by humanistic psychology which would like us to believe the basic goodness inherent in all people will rise above any problems created by divorce.

To review, children will be affected by divorce. The affect that the divorce will have on the child will depend upon a combination how the divorce was handled by the parents, the age of the child when the divorce took place and the individual child's personality. The type of adjustment that children make to divorce will be greatly influenced by the way in which their parents can continue to parent them after the divorce and the consistency and quality of the contact that the non-custodial parent maintains, with the children.

## ***Practical Suggestions For Ministering To Families Which Have Experienced Divorce***

Pastors and teachers can help educate parents regarding the effect that divorce will likely have on their children. In doing this, you can be specific and break down the developmental stages and match them to some of the classical reactions. I have found that parents have been very appreciative of knowing this information. Pastors and teachers can emphasize and encourage the importance of the non-custodial parent to have a continuing relationship with the children. It might be that as a pastor you would be counseling with a non-custodial parent after a divorce and you would have the opportunity to lift their spirits and encourage them to continue being the best and most involved parent they can be with their children. As a teacher, you can encourage a non-custodial parent to be involved in school functions and take an interest in their child's education.

In whatever context divorce is discussed in front the children, it is important that the law and gospel would be given and applied to the situation. Children need to know that even though their parents have sinned and did transgress God's commands, they will be forgiven if they are repentant. It is also important for the children to know that despite their close ties with their parents, the Lord looks upon them as individuals and does not charge them with the sins of their parents. This helps children to see that they need not feel guilty for and receive forgiveness for sins they did not commit.

Children are fragile and depend on their parents to meet certain basic needs (e.g. security, unconditional

love, etc.). It is frightening but true that some children become so damaged in their early years that the impact may be irreversible - that is, those children may never have healthy self-esteem or be able to function as loving productive family members.

Churches, as a whole, may explore how they could best meet the needs of families that have experienced divorce. Perhaps some type of group for such single parents or stepparents would supply the needed support that they need to get over the hump and adjust to their new way of life. The support and encouragement received from people in similar circumstances can be a very powerful influence on people. Simply by recognizing single parent or stepparent families, some of the stigma can be removed. By remaining in close fellowship with others in the congregation, these families can be strengthened and encouraged knowing that they are accepted by fellow Christians.

Education to promote supportive and nurturing families is important in the prevention of divorce and family deterioration. This education can take many forms. Building a good library of relevant Christian literature is an easy way to start. There are many films and filmstrips available which model positive Christian family interaction. Themes about Christian marriage and family can be used in sermons. Children in school could be exposed to many different ideas about the importance of following God's plan for marriage and family. Special workshops presented for couples in the congregation can go a long way to preventing marital problems. One of the plusses of educational programs is that they are for the most part non-threatening and accepted by a very large number of people in the church. Little bits and pieces about Christian family living, which are picked up through education programs or materials within the church, can often become very helpful to a person who is having minor marital problems. The possibilities for developing a family life education program within your church and school are restricted only by the imagination and commitment of your congregation.

In considering ministering to people affected by divorce, it is important that you start by ministering to the members of your own family. The problems of both adults and children from broken home are numerous and the calls for help may exceed the time and energy and expertise you will have. You will not be able to help everyone. At times, it will seem like you are working alone and you will not see any positive results from your efforts. We are only the Lord's instruments to be used in the way in which He would want us to be used. We all have a very definitive calling, outlined in the Bible, to minister unto our own families. Through ministering to your own family, you will receive the strength and encouragement that you need to continue working in your ministry with people who have great needs.

Finally, you can become an important role model to the congregation, not as a Called Worker, but as a husband, wife, father, mother or child in your own family. As more and more families in our Christian circles break up, more positive role models of families are needed. By practicing what the Lord says about ministering to your family, you can become such a role model to your people.