

Ministering to Children of Divorce: Understanding Children of Divorce

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The society in which we live is experiencing an epidemic that affects millions of children each year. Young innocent victims are helpless to defend themselves from the pain and misery they are forced to bear. These victims are children of divorce.

The number of young people affected by divorce continues to grow but the devastating consequences of their experience is often overlooked or misunderstood. More than one and one-half million divorces occur annually in the United States and approximately 60-70% continue to involve children.¹ As a result, more and more children are living in single-parent homes.

This study will focus on Christians ministering to children who live in single-parent homes as a result of divorce. The purpose of this investigation is to discern the needs of children of divorce, determine if local churches, pastors and individual Christians are responsible to meet those needs, and identify how those needs can be met. This article will examine pertinent statistics, the divorce experience of children, the effects of divorce on children, and typical responses of children to divorce.

The Statistics of Divorce

Our country is filled with children who know from personal experience the trauma of divorce. Many are living in single-parent homes because of a decision made by their parents. In 1980 there were twelve million children in the United States under the age of 18

A second article "Ministering to Children of Divorce: Helping Children of Divorce" which will deal with the needs of children of divorce, the obligation to help children of divorce, and the practice of helping children of divorce, will appear in the Fall 1991 issue of *CBTI*.

whose parents were divorced.² Since then, more than 1 million children each year have faced the crisis of divorce.³ In 1984, 54% of divorcing couples had at least one child under the age of 18. One study estimates that 38% of all white and 75% of all black children born to married parents will experience the fallout from divorce before the age 16.⁴ A 1982 study revealed that 20% of all the children in the United States were living in a single-parent home with their divorced mother and 1.9% were living in a single-parent home with their divorced father.⁵ The number of children who live with one parent as a result of divorce continues to increase.

The statistics are staggering. Few people do not personally know of some children of divorce - either through their own divorce experience or that of relatives, friends or neighbors. In every community where independent fundamental Bible-believing churches are ministering, there are children living in single-parent homes because of divorce. Some of these children attend our Sunday Schools, Christian Schools, and church activities.

With the number of children of divorce multiplying within our communities and churches, Christians need to understand what these young people have experienced and determine how God would have believers minister to them.

The Experience of Divorce

The majority of pastors, youth pastors, Sunday School teachers, Junior Church workers, and other Christians who minister to children of broken homes have little understanding of what these young people have been exposed to. Years ago, the details of divorce were seldom shared because of the stigma associated with it. Today divorce has become more commonplace in our society. Yet, most people who have never experienced divorce are ignorant of what it involves. Our society as a whole has minimized and misunderstood the adverse effects divorce produces in the lives of children.

Every divorce experience is unique. No two family situations are identical. However, understanding some general factors that relate to most divorce experiences will benefit those who minister to children of divorce. If we are to help these young people, we need to discern what they have been through and how they have responded to the emotional challenges they have faced.

To understand what children from broken homes have experienced, one must first realize that divorce is not merely a point-

in-time event when a court declares a husband and wife legally separated. Divorce is a process involving many devastating experiences over a period of time. For a child, this often includes family strife and discord prior to the "official" divorce. Children face the shock of being told that a parent is leaving, the terror of a parent actually departing, the struggle of a custody battle and many other traumatic changes that result from a parent being gone.

The family heading for divorce often lives in a world of turmoil. Children watch their parents fight and argue day after day. Home-life before divorce can be extremely unstable. Though few statistics are available, articles and books on the subject suggest that conflict prior to divorce is quite common. Recent studies indicate that conflict in the home greatly influences the effect of divorce upon young people.⁶

Children are seldom prepared for the crisis of divorce. Most young people never expect their parents to end their marriage. For some families, a father or mother, without prior warning, tells their spouse they are leaving. Even if the conflict of the home has been very visible, children usually deny the seriousness of the problem and think that all will work out eventually.⁷

Learning that parents are getting a divorce is a devastating experience for children. In an instant, the security of their world collapses. The news that one of the most dominant figures in a child's life is leaving almost always produces shock and a feeling of abandonment. A girl two years after her parents divorced recalls what happened, "I remember it was near my birthday when I was to be 6 that Dad said at lunch he was leaving. I tried to say, 'No, Dad, don't do it,' but I couldn't get my voice out. I was much too shocked."⁸

Children are most often initiated to the cruelty of divorce without any preparation. Some estimate that 80% of the children get no warning at all.⁹ Parents, in an attempt to "spare" their children pain, fail to explain what is happening. In a time of tremendous turmoil, children are left to sort out for themselves their confused emotions. They struggle to make sense of a crumbling world of which they have absolutely no control.

Some children must face the additional strain of a custody battle. This may include actual courtroom appearances and interviewing with a judge. Young people are torn by appeals from both parents who are fighting for custody. When all is said and done, ten times as many children reside with their divorced mother as with their father.¹⁰ A few parents negotiate for joint custody where both share equal responsibility in caring for the children. Under this arrangement, sons

and daughters shuttle between two homes throughout the week or at different times during the year. Sometimes children are left with grandparents or other relatives because neither parent wants them.

The trauma of divorce does not end when legal documents are finalized or one parent leaves. The post-divorce environment continues to inflict additional wounds upon the children involved. These victims of divorce must adjust to new relationships with both parents. Interaction between family members is drastically altered.

Following divorce, children often experience "diminished parenting." The custodial parent usually has less time to help his children through this difficult period of adjustment. These parents are bombarded with new responsibilities - managing family finances, dealing with legal proceedings, locating housing, finding or maintaining employment, arranging child care, and assuming extra duties previously handled by their former spouse. In addition, the parent at home is working through his or her own recovery - dealing with loss, handling guilt and bitterness, sorting out self-image, and regaining confidence. This leaves children without needed parental encouragement and assistance. Robert Emery concludes that the changes which occur in a child's continuing relationship with his parents has a greater long-term influence than the trauma of parental separation.¹¹

Divorce often produces a strained relationship between the child and his custodial parent. In addition to having new responsibilities and less time to spend with their children, these parents also bear the burden of single-parenting. They are now the sole adult who must encourage, discipline, counsel and correct the children at home. There are no longer two parents sharing the demands of parenting. One divorced father explains the challenge of raising four children alone. "When I was married, I never realized how much I relied on my wife to fill in the gaps in my relationship with my kids: to be tough when I was sweet and sweet when I was tough. Now I have to be sweet with one hand and tough with the other."¹²

There are additional problems that children have with their custodial parent. No matter which parent initiated the divorce, children tend to blame both parents for not staying together. Young victims of divorce often express their anger and bitterness by attacking the closest target - the parent they live with. The delicate life-line between child and parent is further weakened by acts of anger.

Divorce sometimes means the loss of contact with one parent. A 1983 study indicated that over 50% of divorced children in the United States had not seen their fathers in the last year and only 16.4% saw them as often as once a week or more.¹³ Contact with nonresidential mothers is much greater with 87% seeing their children within the last year and 31% visiting on a weekly basis.¹⁴ Contact with non-custodial fathers usually diminishes with time.

It should not be surprising that the absence of a parent can have damaging effects upon children. God designed the family to include both a mother and a father. Children in a single-parent home are missing an important role model that God intended them to have. This does not make these homes doomed to failure. However, the problems that result from the absence of one parent cannot be denied.

The majority of children of divorce have limited or no contact with their father. The absence of a dad is not the cause of all the problems children without fathers have. It does, however, affect children. The following is a summary of some statistical tendencies for young people raised apart from their father:

1. Young boys had increased chances of developing inappropriate sex-role behaviors.
2. Boys tended to have a lower level of moral development compared to boys with fathers.
3. Girls had a greater tendency to behave inappropriately in heterosexual relationships.
4. Both boys and girls tended to exhibit lower academic performance.¹⁵

Researchers agree that the child who is missing a parent of the same sex faces the most difficulties.¹⁶ Mothers readily recognize the problems of raising a boy without a dad. Fathers also understand the complications of raising a girl without a mom. Sons and daughters are left without a role model to follow. They lack a parent who personally knows the struggles that boys and girls experience. The guidance and influence that God intended parents to have on their children is lost or greatly diminished when divorce occurs.

Broken homes experience a variety of problems that hinder healthy parent/child relationships. It is not unusual for divorced parents to criticize their former spouse in front of their children and seek to gain a child's undivided allegiance. One fourteen year old girl

tells of the "loyalty dilemma." "Mom doesn't want me to like Dad, and vice versa. She tells me bad stories. He tells me others. I'm always caught in the middle."¹⁷ In some cases, insecure parents periodically ask their children, "Who do you want to live with?" in hopes of maintaining loyalty. Children are forced to be the official "messenger" between two angry parents who refuse to talk to one another. A common aspect of divorce that children despise is being interrogated by a parent after visiting with the other parent. Keeping peace with mom and dad turns family life into an emotional battlefield.

Many children of divorce live in a world of double-standards. Parents who could not agree to stay together seldom agree on how to raise children once they are separated. The child follows one set of rules at home and another when visiting his non-custodial parent. Non-custodial fathers tend to have more lax rules and lower expectations for their children's conduct.¹⁸ Double-standards confuse children. They learn to believe that right is "relative." It is not surprising that when children return home to more definite rules they have a difficult time adjusting. The dangerous impact of double-standards is especially crucial where one parent is saved and the other unregenerate. Some children are taught Christian values during the week by one parent but every other weekend are exposed to a lifestyle that totally contradicts those values.

A child's relationship to his divorced parents often encounters additional tension. It is not unusual for the nonresidential parent to spoil his children when they visit. This artificial lifestyle creates problems when a child returns home to the custodial parent who cannot financially compete. Suddenly dad who left is the "good guy" and mom who remained is the "bad guy." It is more fun going out to eat and playing video games every other weekend with the non-custodial parent than doing homework and household chores with the parent at home.

Children of divorce sometimes live in a world of unkept promises. Contrary to the "indulgent" mom or dad, some non-custodial parents repeatedly make promises to their children they never keep. A child waits anxiously to be picked up for a "special" weekend but his parent never comes. With broken hearts, young people unpack their suitcases as well as their dreams. Some children face this pattern of disappointment throughout their childhood. Divorced parents, in an attempt to alleviate guilt feelings, sometimes promise children expensive gifts. Unfortunately, the visit to the store is always a

weekend away. Such activity disintegrates the child/parent relationship. A child learns that he can not trust anyone, especially those closest to him.

Divorce for children involves more than the loss of a parent. Because of relocation, children often lose their friends, their neighborhood, and their home. Friends stay away because they feel awkward and are not sure what to say. Over a period of time, children become aware of additional losses that divorce brings - loss of their family unit, loss of family outings, loss of dad or mom coming to baseball games or school programs. Although society tells children from broken homes that divorce is common, they still feel cheated when they see two-parent families.

Following divorce, many families experience a drastic reduction in their standard of living. This is especially true for divorced mothers and their custodial children. The median income of the female-head-of-household is one half that of male-headed households.¹⁹ Since the majority of children live with their mother, the financial burdens can be great. While 80% of all mothers with custody have been awarded child support, only 47% receive full support, 27% receive partial support and 26% receive no support.²⁰ A study between 1968 and 1974 indicated that real incomes of couples who remained married increased by 21.7%, while divorced women and men decreased 29.3% and 19.2% respectively.²¹

The Effects of Divorce

Having considered what children experience as a result of divorce, some important questions must be asked. Are children from broken homes different from other young people? Is divorce damaging? How are children affected? Are the effects long term or short term?

On the outside, children of divorce may not appear to be different. Yet, they have experienced emotional pressures and problems that affect them in a variety of ways. Children face tremendous challenges before, during and after their parents are divorced.

In the past, it had been thought that children were flexible enough to cope with the difficulties that divorce brings.

Twenty years ago, many Americans were alarmed by the spread of divorce, but they took comfort in the conviction of most psychologists that kids would bounce back quickly after a family

break-up. After two or three years of grieving, it was believed, the sons and daughters of divorce would be almost as good as new.²²

In a world where broken homes are commonplace, parents can easily find someone to reassure them that children quickly rebound from divorce. However, the personal experience of millions of children as well as research studies reveal that the pain and problems of divorce do not dissipate quickly. Sometimes they never disappear.

Today we know divorce inflicts suffering upon its young victims that often lasts for many years. More and more people agree that children are not equipped to deal with the serious problems they face in divorce. A man from a broken home explains,

My parents were divorced when I was twelve years of age, and I know that my life was changed forever because of their breakup. As a psychotherapist I have also worked with many divorcing and divorced families, and my experience has convinced me that the children of divorced parents are indeed different from other children - for divorce, although no longer the stigma it once was, is nevertheless a wrenching, painful, unfortunate series of events that imposes on children adjustments and changes they often are not capable of making.²³

In 1980, Albert Solnit, the director of the Yale Child Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, stated that "divorce is one of the most serious and complex mental-health crises facing children of the eighties."²⁴ His prognosis has proven true even though many have been slow to recognize it.

Not all children are affected the same way or for the same length of time. Major elements of adjustment include:

1. Conflict within the home before and after the divorce.
2. Parental reactions to the divorce.
3. Parental interaction with the children.
4. The quality of parenting following the divorce.
5. The number of changes the child faces as a result of divorce.
6. Support and encouragement from others.
7. The influence of sinful behavior exhibited by both parents and children.

Some children appear to go through divorce with little noticeable effect on their lives. They seem to adjust to their situation and

continue life with few apparent problems. However, one must not conclude that children who act courageous have escaped being negatively affected. The scars of divorce are not easily avoided. Some children keep their feelings within themselves and are faced with maladjustment problems in their adult years.

Most young people display emotional and behavioral responses that expose the damaging effects of divorce. A study in England indicated that children of divorce have a shorter life expectancy, experience more illness, and leave school earlier than children from intact families.²⁵ In New York City, two out of every three teenage suicides come from broken homes.²⁶ The breakup of the family unit does affect children.

It is no longer debated that divorce negatively affects young people. There is, however, some disagreement as to the long-lasting effects of divorce upon children. Heath and Lynch conclude that most children resume normal adjustment within two years following their parents' separation.²⁷ They believe that only a minority of children experience long-term psychological problems that can be attributed to divorce.

Suggesting that the effects of parental separation diminish with time is encouraging to a society that promotes divorce. This conclusion, however, is not accepted by all who have studied children of divorce. Many are convinced that the consequences of divorce are more serious and longer lasting than some would have us believe. Children struggle well into adulthood with repressed anger, anxiety, and depression stemming from the time of their parents' divorce.²⁸

A ten year study of children from sixty divorced families revealed some interesting results. The researcher concluded that fear of romantic commitment could plague the females in her study for the rest of their lives.²⁹ Children of divorce can become emotionally crippled because they feel no control of their lives. Wallerstein found that divorce was the single most important cause of enduring distress in the lives of the adolescents she studied.³⁰ Most children live with the pain and problems of a broken home throughout their childhood. Many are affected throughout their lives because they never properly deal with their emotional response to divorce.

Divorce damages children in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Some of the more important ones are summarized below.

1. The collapse of the family structure causes children to feel alone and abandoned. Children feel that they have been deserted by the parent who has left.
2. The negative behavior and attitudes of parents during and after divorce provide a "model" that children often imitate.
3. Parents, because of limited availability and diminished emotional resources, do not provide the support and guidance children desperately need during this time of crisis. Children are seldom helped to deal with their emotions properly.
4. Children lose the important influence of the sex-role model of the absent parent.
5. Divorce creates conflicts of loyalty with children being pressured to love one parent and not the other.
6. The separation of parents destroys a child's world of security and creates uncertainty about the future.
7. Anger and resentment between parents create fear in the children involved.
8. Children take upon themselves the guilt of causing the divorce and the burden of worrying about their parents.
9. Divorce results in the loss of many things - a parent, home, friends, school.

Divorce plunges children into a world of crisis. Dr. Lee Salk, a child psychologist, states, "The trauma of divorce is second only to death. Children sense a deep loss and feel that they are suddenly vulnerable to forces beyond their control."³¹ The stress of shock, fear of abandonment, feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, and grief over the loss of a parent as well as other losses bring much misery to children of broken homes.

A child's sense of permanence and understanding of commitment cannot escape the tarnishing effect of divorce. These children see first hand that the two most important role models of their lives do not believe in commitment. They already live in a world where many modern conveniences are "disposable." The example of their parents further teaches them that nothing can be expected to last. A college drop-out whose parents divorced when he was ten explains that some things are "flexible, like school and marriage."³² Children of divorce sometimes fail to develop long term values and lose faith in relationships with other people.

Divorce produces life-long changes in interfamily relationships. The complex web of relatives is often confusing. A child has a biological mother and a biological father who do not live together.

Sometimes children spend a weekend with their father and his girlfriend. If the absent parent remarries, the child now has an additional step-parent and a new set of grandparents. Children from other marriages are sometimes introduced into this maze of relationships. With 85% of divorced people remarrying and 60% of these second marriages failing³³ some children have family ties that are mind-boggling. Such confusion hinders the development of meaningful relationships with parents, siblings, and grandparents.

A damaging effect of divorce involves how children value themselves. At a time when their self-concepts are being formed, security and self-worth are greatly challenged. The chain of events involved in divorce, if not dealt with properly, can have devastating effects upon a child's self-esteem.

The damage to a child's self-esteem during divorce usually comes not so much from the loss of united parents and a single home as from the indignities caused by other people's reactions, the legal process, and the way the child is battered emotionally. When children are treated like pieces of property to be bartered, when their feelings and wishes are ignored, when they are used as hostages in a parent's effort to gain material advantages in a settlement, or when they are used as weapons to satisfy an urge for revenge against the other spouse, you have a situation that has the potential to do a great deal of harm to the way a child values himself or herself.³⁴

A child who considers himself to be of little value will live his life accordingly. One must properly understand his worth if he is to function as God desires him to. All men have value because they are God's special creation made in His image. Yet, man has marred that image because of sin. God, in His love and mercy, has provided the way for every man to be restored to a right relationship with Him through Christ. It is God's desire that all men, through a personal relationship with Christ, realize their great worth and function as those highly valued by God.

Children with parents who claim to be saved are affected in special ways when their parents separate. In some cases a parent who has professed Christ assumes a lifestyle that contradicts the biblical morality the child has been taught. Such duplicity causes young people to question the validity of the Bible. A child's view of God is in jeopardy when his parents' faith is not able to keep their family together.

It is not unusual for children, whether saved or not, to pray to God for the reunion of their parents. When that fails to take place the child considers God uninterested or unable to help. Some children live with a saved mom and attend Christian Day School during the week but visit the world of an unsaved father every other weekend. Regular exposure to conflicting lifestyles can be spiritually devastating for children - especially teenagers.

The Response of Children to Divorce

Sir Isaac Newton recognized a universal principle of our world - to every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction. Young people who experience divorce respond in a variety of ways because each child is different and faces a unique situation. Although children from broken homes should not be classified as a certain "type," there are some common ways that children react to divorce. Recognizing typical responses and understanding their causes can be of great help to those who minister to children of divorce.

God has designed all of us with a variety of emotions. Every child who encounters divorce has emotional responses to that disruptive experience. Although secular "therapists" too often overemphasize how people "feel," Christians must not overlook the fact that God has created us as emotional beings. Properly dealing with our emotions is an essential part of living as God intended us to live. What a child feels before, during, and after divorce will affect how he adjusts to the changes and challenges divorce brings. If we are to help children who have experienced divorce we must begin to understand how they feel.

As mentioned earlier, divorce is not a point-in-time event but rather a series of traumatic experiences that children must respond to. When a child learns that his parents are getting divorced his initial reaction is shock and then denial. Children seldom believe their parents are really going to separate. The emotional strain on a child when a parent leaves is intense.

Children of divorce feel rejected by a parent who claims to love them yet leaves. When parents are divorced, children are divorced too. The parent who departs may soothe his conscience by telling children he truly loves them. Nonetheless, sons and daughters still feel rejected when a parent moves away. Children think that if their mother or father really loved them he or she would not leave.

Benjamin T. Griffin, in his article, "Children Whose Parents Are Divorcing," identifies "separation anxiety" as the fundamental response

children have to divorce.³⁵ The breaking up of one's family is a threat to a child's sense of trust and security. To a young person, his parents are his security.

Younger children who face divorce actually think that one parent has abandoned them. Older children understand that their relationship with the absent parent is forever changed. Anxiety is a distorted form of fear and most children experience it as a result of a parent leaving. The child is more than "worried" about his situation. He experiences intense fear and uneasiness within his whole being. In addition to losing one parent, many children fear the possibility of being abandoned by the parent who has remained.

God created man with the defense mechanism of fear. However, unresolved fear that is intense or experienced over a long period of time can be very destructive. Anxiety produced in children because of divorce may express itself in trembling, restlessness, loss of appetite, frightening dreams, or increased pulse rate. Stomach aches, nausea, or diarrhea are the most common physical reactions to intense anxiety. Difficulty in breathing, tightness in the chest, and other respiratory problems can occur at all ages. Children experience anxiety from the shock of having a parent leave as well as other heartwrenching experiences throughout the divorce ordeal.

One family counselor declares, "Every divorced child is likely to be an angry child."³⁶ Miller feels that intense anger "is the single most identifiable emotion in divorced children."³⁷ Anger is an emotional response to feeling hurt, frustrated or threatened. All children of divorce feel they have been mistreated, overlooked, and uncared for. Their anger is intensified because they have no control over the situation causing their pain. Few children want their parents divorced. They are angry because they view themselves as unwanted and rejected.

The anger of these children is expressed in a variety of ways. Small children throw tantrums and scream when they do not get their way. Older children vent their outrage in misbehavior and aggression. Because they have been treated harshly, they mistreat others by ordering or bullying. The expression of anger and bitterness can occur in both boys and girls. Wounded children unknowingly alienate the very people they need the most.

Angry behavior is frequently directed at the parent who is caring for the child. Children, like most adults, do not think rationally when they have been hurt. Even if the custodial parent was not responsible for the divorce, children sometimes misbehave to irritate them. One

teenager refused to tie his shoes because the "clicking" sound bothered his mother.

The bitterness of divorced children can also be turned inward. Some try to bury their exasperation deep within themselves because they feel helpless. Inward anger can be expressed in moodiness and a negative attitude toward life. The Bible warns against storing up anger (Ephesians 4:26) and the results can be very damaging. Children who never deal with their resentment often carry it with them throughout their lives.

A major reaction to divorce that is often overlooked and misunderstood is grief. This emotional response is common after the loss of a significant person. It is usually associated with the death of a loved one. For children, the feeling of loss because of divorce is very similar to experiencing the death of a parent. A loved one has departed and the way things have always been has "died" when parents separate. Children experience intense sadness because of the absence of a parent and the collapse of their family.

Although there is some debate as to the specific stages of the grief process, professionals recognize that children of divorce experience shock, denial, depression, fantasies of parents reuniting, and eventual acceptance of reality that cannot be changed. Swihart and Brigham, in their book *Helping Children of Divorce*, identify the importance of the grief process in children. "The grief process needs careful attention and support from others because children who are not allowed to deal with their pain may well carry it into adulthood where it has potential for being disruptive."³⁸

Unfortunately, most post-divorce environments provide children little opportunity to communicate and deal with their feelings. The grief experienced by children is too often overlooked by parents who are working through their own emotional struggles and friends who are unsure of what to do. These heartbroken children are left to bear their grief alone.

While our society has social and religious rituals and support systems when a person dies, few exist for the emotional death of divorce, and none for children. Therefore, the child's grief and accompanying depression are borne in solitary and internalized ways.³⁹

When young people are prevented from expressing and dealing with their feelings during this time of great loss an important process is short-circuited. :

An emotional response to divorce closely associated with grief is depression. "Reactive depression" is a response to severe loss or threat of loss resulting in dejection and great sadness. A severely depressed person feels overwhelmed with his sorrow and helpless to change his condition. One professional stated, "Divorce represents a loss of so many things that a deep depression is almost unavoidable in children."⁴⁰ A child who is depressed may appear to be unhappy, lose interest in all normal activities, complain about headaches, appear discontented, and engage in self-rejecting talk. Such a response to divorce is not unusual. If a child is not helped through this time of overwhelming sadness the effects can be damaging.

Many professional counselors feel that boys are harder hit by divorce than girls. In our culture, males are expected not to display their emotions. Even though they are still children, boys feel the social pressure to act "like men." Although no one tells them, boys sense they must be strong and should not cry. They often suppress their sorrow by pretending to be brave and denying their pain. This denial can result in emotional isolation which many exhibit later in life.

Since the separation of their parents is causing them such intense pain, it is quite common for young people to assume they are somehow responsible. Self-blame puts additional burden upon children who are already emotionally overloaded. Younger children particularly feel culpable because they tend to look at events in terms of their good and bad behavior.⁴¹ One nine year old girl explains,

In a way, I thought I'd made it [her parent's divorce] happen. I thought maybe I'd acted mean to my mother and my sister and I was being punished by God. So I tried to be really good by not waking Mom before schooltime and getting my own breakfast and maybe God would change His mind.⁴²

Some children believe that if they were gone their parents would still be together. This might explain why young people in the 10 to 14 year-old age group who have attempted suicide identify parental separation and divorce as a primary reason for trying to end their life.⁴³

When considering children of divorce it is important to recognize that responses vary with age. A variety of studies have indicated that within particular age groups children had fairly predictable responses to divorce. Understanding this can be very helpful to those who work with children of a specific age group.

According to a 1980 study, children three to five years old are commonly bewildered by divorce.⁴⁴ Their inability to understand can lead them to unusual fantasies, fears of abandonment, and aggressive actions. Children of this age often blame themselves for the separation of their parents. Nursery school workers reported that children whose parents had divorced within the last year were more likely to want physical contact, had more difficulty getting along in a group and had lower self-esteem.⁴⁵ It is not unusual for preschoolers and kindergartners to regress to an earlier stage of development showing more dependence upon adults. In addition, divorced children of this age group are often irritable, whining, and fearful.

Children between the ages of five and eight typically blame themselves for their parents' separation. Regression to younger types of behavior is not uncommon. They fear being abandoned and can exhibit loss of sleep, bedwetting and a deep sense of sadness. Some experts feel that this age is the most crucial for children of divorce and it is the one with the largest number of young people affected. These children are old enough to understand the seriousness of their parents' divorce but lack the adequate skills to deal with it.

Older children, ages nine to twelve, experience anger as the dominant emotion. This animosity is directed at both parents but also crosses over to peers and other authority figures. Children may alienate friends, relatives, and teachers. At the same time, these young people often look for one individual, a teacher or another adult, to develop a close relationship with. Children of this age group have a clear understanding of their parents' divorce and strongly disapprove of it.⁴⁶

Teenagers of broken homes bear additional burdens because they understand the implications of divorce better than younger children. Teenage sons and daughters recognize the many losses that divorce brings and fear how it will affect their lives. Adolescents from divorced families worry about the lack of financial support and the possibility that they will never or should never get married. This concern is very real to those who are passing through the emotional and physical changes of adolescence. Teens are inclined to remove themselves from their parents' domain. Divorce often intensifies their

desire to stay away from home. For some, parental separation causes them to retard their development toward adulthood because they become more insecure. Others assume the role of an adult too early in an attempt to be strong and independent.

Children of all ages display an obsessive desire to reunite their parents and return to the way things were before the divorce. One three-year-old repeatedly tried to put his father's hand in his mother's hand. A nine-year-old boy, after his weekly visit with his father, always throws a penny in the wishing well hoping his parents will get back together. Children who live in this world of fantasy often fail to deal with the world of reality.

Young people go to great extremes to bring their parents back together. A nine-year-old girl stopped wearing a winter jacket hoping that her parents would reunite to care for her when she became ill. At times, children run away from home to force a separated parent to return. Some older children have attempted suicide thinking their death would cause mom and dad to stay together for the younger children.⁴⁷

Contrary to the wishful thinking of parents who separate, children are affected by divorce. All young people who are forced to travel the painful journey of divorce cannot escape its misery. Fortunately, these children are not destined to a life of maladjustment. With the help of God and His people, children of divorce can learn to live life as God intended.

Notes:

¹ Jim Dycus and Barbara Dycus, "Single Parents" *Singles Ministry Handbook*, ed by Douglas L Fagerstrom (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988) 62; see also Robert E Emery, *Marriage, Divorce, and Children's Adjustment* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1988) 27

² Linda Bird Francke and others, "The Children of Divorce" *Newsweek* (February 11, 1980) 58

³ Kathryn A London, "Children of Divorce" *Vital and Health Statistics* (January 1989) 1

⁴ Emery, *Marriage, Divorce and Children's Adjustment*, 29

⁵ *Ibid*, 27

⁶ *Ibid*, 95

⁷ Archibald D Hart, *Children and Divorce* (Waco: Word Books, 1982) 67

⁸ Francke, "The Children of Divorce," 58

⁹ *Ibid*, 59

- ¹⁰ Emery, *Marriage, Divorce and Children's Adjustment*, 31
- ¹¹ Ibid, 81
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