

Ministering to Children in Fractured Families

How divorce affects kids — and how you can help families heal

[BRIAN DOLLAR](#) ON MAY 15, 2018

Working with children for more than 20 years, I've repeatedly seen how news of their parents' divorce shatters their world. I wasn't ready to deal with it as an adult (my parents divorced when I was 25), and I'm sure it's even more difficult for children to process.

Everything they know, everything they depend on for emotional stability, is gone in an instant. They may have detected major issues in the parents' relationship for years, or perhaps one parent suddenly discovered a history of infidelity by the other.

Whether the decision to divorce is immediate or drawn out, it devastates everyone involved. Often, the parents are working through their own trauma and don't know how to help their children cope. It's always a tragedy, no matter how amicably the split happens.

More than 40 percent of marriages in the U.S. end in divorce, and depending on the state, between 26 and 47 percent of children live in single-parent homes. More than 2,000 blended families form every day, but more than two-thirds of those fail within six years.

By studying God's Word, we can all agree that divorce is never God's plan. I don't think it's ever anyone's plan. Nobody gets married thinking, *I sure can't wait to divorce this person one day*. God's desire is that marriages thrive and last "until death do us part."

Unfortunately, divorce happens. When it does, it affects everyone involved. Often, it disproportionately affects the children in an extremely negative way.

I've seen the devastation of divorce in the faces of parents and their kids. Confusion, resentment, discouragement and depression are common results. If those emotions don't resolve with love, honesty and time, it deeply affects future relationships.

Hurt people hurt people, and they often don't even know why they have difficulties in relationships. In the lives of children, a few of the most common results of divorce include stress, a sense of instability, diminished trust, and changing attitudes toward responsibilities.

Increased Stress

No matter what age children are when their parents announce the breakup of their home, kids are never emotionally prepared for the shock. Stress shows up in many different ways.

Relationally, kids may become defiant, or they may withdraw. Emotionally, children may become hardened and defiant, or they may regularly burst into tears. Physically, the stress often finds the weakest part of the person's body; headaches, stomachaches and other gastrointestinal problems are common. Even the most mundane, everyday decisions can become difficult.

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Lack of stability

When parents split up, it shakes the most secure point in the child's universe. God made us to be relational beings, and the home is the first and foremost place of rest, comfort and security. When that's disrupted, the child naturally questions the validity and reliability of everything and everyone.

In addition, the child often must move back and forth from Mom's house to Dad's house. This can make it difficult to feel settled. Often, kids may feel like pawns in their parents' blame game.

Eroded or Shattered Trust

When their security crumbles, children may put up walls and refuse to trust anyone, even those who are the most stable, loving people in their lives.

Or, in contrast, children may trust too much, putting their faith in untrustworthy people in the hope that trusting someone will make them feel safe again.

Irresponsibility or Hyper-Responsibility

Everything the kids have known turns upside down. The parents have been trying to teach their kids to be responsible, but now the children wonder, *What's the use?*

Children may neglect homework, cleaning their rooms, taking showers, and doing other normal things they have for years. Or they may react in the opposite way, trying to earn their parents' love by being overly responsible.

Some kids use their exemplary behavior as a bargaining chip in an attempt to get their parents to reconcile. It's magical thinking, but it shows the desperation of the child to restore a happy home.

Grandparents and other extended family members can provide much-needed stability and support during the confusing and painful time before, during and after the divorce, but be careful. Some extended family members become furious at "that man" or "that woman" for hurting their beloved son or daughter, sister or brother.

Extended family members may be a great source of wisdom, insight and hope, or they can throw more gasoline on the fire of resentment.

Ministry Response

So, as children's pastors, what can we do? I believe we must pray, train and encourage.

Pray that God will be the Lord of every home. Pray that parents will see divorce as an absolute last resort.

Train parents in what the Bible teaches about the sanctity of marriage and the importance of family. Help them see the effects of a future divorce on their children.

Encourage parents to seek wise counsel when dealing with marital issues. Encourage them to see a Christian marriage counselor. Normalize counseling as a means to allow someone else to speak into the issues from a fresh perspective.

Marriage and family counseling often have an unfair stigma. Counselors are there to help lead people through life's toughest issues when emotions and judgment are cloudy.

For more on this subject, you can pick up a copy of my book, "[Talk Now And Later: How To Lead Kids Through Life's Tough Topics](#)." There is an entire chapter on how to talk to kids about divorce.

Whether it is your family or one that is close to you, divorce affects us all. We must be prepared to help mitigate the negative effects divorce has on our children.

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