



UNDERSTANDING THE LONG-TERM LEGACY OF DIVORCE

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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As children's ministry leaders you may have found the article posted last week, "[Understanding the Short-Term Legacy of Divorce](#)," interesting and relevant to the work you are currently doing with the children in your church. This week, as we discuss the long-term legacy of divorce, you might be inclined to think that understanding these is not as important as many are not likely to show up until children have left your ministry. Quite to the contrary, it is important for you to recognize the long-term legacies of divorce so that, as church leaders, you can help an individual child to better cope and potentially even lessen the impact of a particular long-term legacy. While the long-term legacy of divorce may, and likely will, still affect the child in future years, your input today may help to lessen the severity of the impact as opposed to the child who hasn't been exposed to the love of Christ and a loving church family.



<http://www.dc4k.org>

At DivorceMinistry4Kids we believe that we serve a powerful God who can, and does, heal these children. We know that personal interaction with these children and intercession through prayer has a great impact on the child of divorce. As churches become more cognizant about the impact of divorce on children they can step up minister more effectively to these children. This can take many

forms including hosting support groups such as DivorceCare for Kids for elementary age children and "The Big D" for teens dealing divorce (<http://sonsetpointministries.com/thebigdinfo/>). Churches can tailor a bible study class or VBS to accommodate hurting children of divorce. These types of ministries and programs can and will give children better outcomes overall as they grow and mature surrounded by the love of God in a church family.

It is important to remember that not every child of divorce will be affected by divorce in the same way. The purpose of this article is to discuss general long-term legacies of divorce that many children experience. If you read the statistics on some of these issues, it can be frightening and disheartening. When I became a single parent, my children were eight and twelve years of age. At first I bought into all the hype and statistics about children of divorce. I felt like my children were doomed. I remember praying and begging the Lord to not let my twelve year old daughter get pregnant at fifteen and to allow my son to graduate from high school and not get involved in drugs. What a pitiful prayer! I shudder to think what would have happened to my children if I had





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held onto those pathetic thoughts. Along the way, the Lord helped me realize my children could survive and thrive.

Today, we want to look at some of the long-term impacts that divorce has on children as they mature into teenagers, young adults and even adulthood. Much of the information in this article comes from my own observations from working with children of divorce for over thirty years. It also comes from the nation's leading adult support group called DivorceCare (www.divorcecare.org) and from interviewing many adult children of divorce.

For the purpose of this article we will look at 8 common long-term legacies of divorce.

1. *An Increased Likelihood of Divorce as an Adult*

Judith Wallerstein, in her book, "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce" states that many adult children of divorce live in fear that they will replicate their parents' history of divorce. Some adult children of divorce have shared with me that they wait nervously to surpass the anniversary of the year their parents divorced. One man told me,

"My parents divorced after seventeen years of marriage. When my wife and I celebrated our 18th anniversary I literally felt myself breathe a big sigh of relief. I felt we had made it home free."

2. *Depression and Anxiety*

Many teens and adult children of divorce never get over the feeling of loneliness they experienced in their younger years when they were left home alone after school or on weekends when the single parent had to work long hours to provide for the family. They experienced overwhelming sadness as children and depression as teens or adults.

Other adult children of divorce feel a constant anxiety that something bad is going to happen to them or to their loved ones. As children, they never get over the thought that the divorce was somehow their fault. Sometimes these thoughts manifest themselves in ways that we might consider "weird." One eight year old that I worked with would not take off his coat. Even on hot summer days he kept his coat on. He explained it this way,

"One day last winter when I got home from school my mom told me to take off my coat and hang it up. I didn't do what she told me."

It was at that time the mom chose to tell the children she was leaving and getting a divorce.





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“I just keep thinking when she comes home I’ll take off my coat and hang it up and then she’ll come back and stay with us forever.”

Even after he outgrew that coat, he kept it and always had it close by just in case his mom came home. Intellectually these adults know the divorce was not their fault, but emotionally the child in them is still in control, still holding onto that coat or some other memorabilia.

Anxiety about relationships is very common in adult children of divorce. They worry that they won’t know how to form long lasting relationships. Many simply don’t know how to be married. No one taught them about marriage. No one taught them about resolving conflict with the person they love the most. Others worry that they will not be able to parent with another person. After all one parent, not two, parented them.

3. **Increased Risk of Suicide**

Suicide in teens of divorce is very high. Some teens of divorce have to grow up too fast and have to take on more responsibility than they can handle. They may be left to parent younger children. Some have to parent their own sad and depressed parent. Others are left on their own late at night or all night and on weekends while one or both parents become entrenched in the dating world. For a lot of teens suicide seems to be a plausible solution to their many problems. Suicide also appears to be “contagious” in that when one teen in a group succeeds at taking their own life, others will attempt the same fate.

4. **Delinquency in Teen Years**

Because teens don’t have the cognitive brain functions of an adult, they don’t have the ability to make wise decisions and choices. They don’t have the brain capacity to think logically and may react unwisely and get into untold trouble. Other teens have too much unsupervised time on their hands, and they use it to get into trouble.

5. **Poor School Performance and High Drop-Out Rates**

Many teen children of divorce struggle with school and oftentimes children will lose upwards of a year of school due to a divorce. If a child’s parents divorced when they were in 4th grade, they may have gotten behind in language or math. They have never been able to catch up to the grade level and when they become a teen, it seems easier to just drop out of school.

School drop-out rates are high for children of divorce. In today’s world, more teens are staying in school and graduating from college than previously, but the drop rate is still too high for the children of divorce. Many



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have spent their lives watching their single parent struggle to make ends meet and they wonder why they should even bother finishing school.

6. *Substance Abuse*

Dependence on alcohol and drugs is high among teen and adult of divorce. Life just seems too hard to endure. Reliance on a substance that makes things seem easier or helps dissipate the anger and hostility becomes a way of life.

7. *Promiscuity and Unwed Teenage Pregnancy*

A lot of young girls will turn to boys to fulfill the role of the father that they feel deserted them. Others watch the revolving bedroom door of one or both parents and wonder why they can't do the same thing. No one takes the time to teach them about moral issues, about that one special love or about birth control. Even in today's world we have many teens that simply don't understand pregnancy issues.

A few teens want someone to love them and think if they have their own child, that child will fill the role of unconditional love.

8. *Pulling away from the Lord in adult years*

This is the one legacy that I have found deeply impacts the adult child of divorce and is impacting our churches. We have a lot of adult children of divorce who are baby Christians walking around in our world. Many adults drop out of church after a divorce and don't continue to take their children to church.

Some research shows that as many as 62% of adult children of divorce leave the faith of their parents. Many are immature Christians frozen in spiritual time warp of where they were as children when the divorce happened. Spiritually many children stop developing after the divorce, never to develop a faith walk or a level of trust that the Lord desires from each of us. They tend to carry over anger toward the earthy parent to their relationship with God, the Heavenly Father. Or they carry over their anger to their spouse.

They don't comprehend various bible stories such as the story of the prodigal son. They tout they are not the ones that left, it was the parent that left the home. They get so caught up in the issues surrounding their own parent's divorce that the deep meaning of the Spiritual aspect of the story is lost to them.

A good article to read regarding adult children of divorce and one that might help children's church leaders have a better understanding of the outcomes of divorce on adults is, "Ministering to the ACOD in Your Singles and Single Parent Ministry" (<http://www.hlp4.com/?q=node/59>).

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Other Resources Related to the Long-Term Legacy of Divorce

- Judith Wallerstein, “The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce, a 25 Year Landmark Study” (Hyperion)
- Elizabeth Marquardt, “Between Two Worlds” <http://www.betweentwoworlds.org/> (Crown Books)
- “Faith and Family: The Core Strengths of American Society”, by Patrick F. Fagan, William G. FitzGerald
Fellow in Family and Cultural Issues The Heritage Foundation, Washington D.C.
<http://kenedy.byu.edu/partners/WFPC/fagan.html>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda’s website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\)](#). Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at Linda@hlp4.com.