



THE SPIRITUAL IMPACTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN: DOES THE SHAPE OF FAMILIES SHAPE FAITH?

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By Wayne D. Stocks

January 17, 2013

INTRODUCTION



This week on [Divorce Ministry 4 Kids](#), we have been looking at the [6/50 Window](#) (a vast mission field consisting of children of divorce and their families) and urging churches to step up and reach out to these kids and their families. Yesterday, the [Institute for American Values](#) released a new report titled “[Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith?](#)” The report, written by Elizabeth Marquardt, Amy Ziettlow, and Charles E. Stokes, represents a call to action for churches in regards to ministering to children of divorce.

The report starts quite simply by stating,

“It’s time for people of faith to talk about the impact of divorce on the next generation.”

Here at Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, we couldn’t agree more! As we have discussed in articles earlier this week, we believe that these kids, and their families, are a great untapped mission field ([the 6/50 Window](#)) and that [the church has largely failed these kids](#). This report puts it even more bluntly:

“The proliferation of varieties of family structures in recent decades means that everything church leaders accepted as true about families can no longer be taken for granted.”

Noting that there has been “strikingly little attention given to how growing up in a divorced family might shape the religious identities and faith journeys of young people,” this report sets out to fill that void of information. It explains,

“‘Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith?’ represents a major effort to examine and understand the religious and spiritual lives of young adults who experienced parental divorce.”

The report, funded by the Lilly Endowment, is based on 13 commissioned papers from top scholars in the fields of religion and families. It is an effort which is greatly appreciated by those of us who work with children of divorce and should give churches pause for reflection, and hopefully impetus for actions, on how to minister effectively to these kids and to their families.





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In the coming weeks, as we continue to discuss [the 6/50 Window](#) and how and why the church should minister to children of divorce, we will provide some additional resources gleaned from this report. The purpose of this article is to provide a summary of the report and some of the important findings therein. This will be accomplished by asking a series of questions about the impact of divorce on a child's faith and turning to the report for answers interspersed with personal commentary and observations. For this summary of the report, we will address the questions:

1. Why is this an important issue?
2. Does divorce impact a child's faith?
3. Why does divorce impact a child's faith?
4. What is the problem with the church?
5. Is there any hope?
6. How can the church help?
7. Where can I find additional information?

WHY IS THIS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE?

The report begins by introducing a "knowledge gap" related to whether or not the type of family structure a child grows up in impacts their religious formation. A common sense response to the question of, "Does divorce impact a child's spiritual journey?" would have to be "Of course!" However, the authors are correct that the empirical and statistical evidence to support such a contention has been somewhat difficult to find. That is one of the many reasons I am grateful that the authors have set forth in this report to consolidate the information which is out there on this very important topic.

The problem of children of divorce is a large and growing problem. Approximately one million children every year experience the divorce of their parents, and while the divorce rate has stabilized in the United States, more and more children experience the dissolution of their parents' relationship as a result of being born into single-parent or cohabiting home. This report reminds us that more than one-half of all children born in the United States each year are born to unmarried mothers. At Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, we include these children born to single or cohabiting parents in our definition of "children of divorce" as the impacts of the dissolution of their parents' relationships are no less painful and impactful than those kids who parents were married.

Given the vast number of children of divorce, the report rightly contends that,

"How this generation of young people and the next approach questions of moral and spiritual meaning—and what choices they make for themselves and their families involving religious identity and involvement—will strongly influence broader trends in religious formation and the future of the churches."



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I would take that one step further. For those of us engaged in ministering to children of divorce, the question is not sociological, or psychological or even practical, it is eternal, and we cannot afford to ignore it any longer! This issue will not only impact the future of the church but will directly influence the eternal destinies of these children, their families, and generations of children after them.

DOES DIVORCE IMPACT A CHILD'S FAITH?

This report, and the studies supporting it, leave no doubt – the divorce of a child's parents directly impacts their faith and spiritual life. It concludes:

"While there are a diverse range of theories about why the adult offspring of divorced parents are less likely to be religiously involved than their peers from intact families, little doubt exists about the correlation or connection."

The report points to a study conducted by Leora Lawton and Regina Bures that found that Catholic and modest Protestant children of divorce are 100% more likely to leave religious practice entirely. The numbers are worse for conservative Protestants where children of divorce are more than three times as likely to leave religious practice.

This is supported by research conducted by Ms. Marquardt for her book [Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce](#) which revealed that:

"Young people from intact families are much more likely to say that they attended religious services regularly as children, with almost three-quarters saying they attended every week or almost every week, compared to just over half of children of divorce. People from divorced families are only half as likely as those from intact families to say that they attended services frequently throughout childhood."

In addition to less frequent attendance at church, the report also found that children of divorce are less likely to "feel religious," less likely to be involved in the regular practice of faith and more likely to consider themselves "spiritual but not religious." Next week we will publish a tool titled "Does The Shape of Families Shape Faith: 10 Key Observations and Conclusions" which will include these and other key findings from the report.

The report leaves little doubt about its conclusion:



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“Taken together, these findings highlight the powerful role that parents, particularly fathers, play in influencing the future religious practices of their children. When parental divorce dissolves the marital bond, the attachment to religious institutions seems to be disrupted for many children. While they may continue to think of themselves as spiritual persons, children of divorce appear to have a more difficult time practicing their faith within the sanctuary of traditional religious institutions.”

WHY DOES DIVORCE AFFECT A CHILD’S FAITH?

A Diminished Role of Parents

Some of the reasons for the spiritual impacts of divorce are clear and quite intuitive. For example, following a divorce children often find themselves separated from one parent physically, and quite often the parent they spend the majority of their time with is emotionally distant and has far less time to spend with the kids.

Studies consistently show that parents are the greatest predictor of the religious life of their kids. The way parents live out their faith walk in front of their kids plays a significant role in the likelihood that kids will become come to own their own faith. In other words, a strong faith that kids see lived out in their day-to-day lives is more likely to lead to a strong faith on the part of children. After a divorce, many of these parents have little time or energy to foster the spiritual development of their children.

In her book [Between Two Worlds](#), Elizabeth Marquardt found that children of divorce parents receive very little religious encouragement from their parents. Marquardt also found that children of divorce get significantly less support in the area of prayer than their peers from intact families and are more likely to question their parents’ faith.

Studies also demonstrate that things like church attendance and involvement in a religious community suffer among adults after a divorce. This directly impacts the children as well. Studies have found that the most important factor in determining religious outcomes for children is whether or not parents have a religious involvement themselves. Many children of divorce attempt to continue coming to church following the divorce of their parents only to leave the church all together later on.

This idea was echoed by [Melinda Denton](#) who postulates that two parent families are in a better position to “support religious practices such as religious service attendance and engagement in a religious community.” Fathers are particularly important to this process which is daunting considering that such a high percentage of children of divorce lose most or all contact with their fathers within a few years following the divorce.





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In examining the data compiled by Ms. Marquardt for her book, Elisa Zhai concluded that:

“...the link between parental divorce and lower likelihood of the grown children’s regular practice of a religion appears to be significantly explained by lower levels of father’s involvement in the religious lives of these children.”

In the society we live in, parents play an even more important role in shaping their children’s religious lives as “congregational involvement and other forms of civic involvement are no longer as normative as they once were.” In other words, in years past when everyone attended church regularly, it was just accepted that children would be involved in youth groups and other activities at the church. Many were likely to be at church multiple days a week, and the likelihood that other members of the congregation would have significant involvement in the life of the child following a divorce may have been higher even if the parent’s faith was not particularly strong. As we have become more individualistic in terms of our church going habits (e.g., church shopping, etc.) those bonds and opportunities have subsided for children following the divorce of their parents.

A Warped View of God

Several studies have confirmed that a child’s early images of God come from their relationship with their own parents (particularly their fathers). In situations where kids feel let down or abandoned by their earthly parents, this often gets projected onto God the Father thereby limiting or hindering their relationship with Him. The report examines attachment theory which posits that children form bonds with their caregivers and end up seeing their world through the lens of those early bonds. For children of divorce, those bonds are damaged or severed perhaps forever altering their view of God.

The report explains:

“If, as theologian Bernard Cooke writes, ‘It is primarily in loving and being loved that we begin to grasp the incredible truth that we are loved by God,’ what happens to children’s faith when someone they love has left? What happens when to be with one parent by definition means not being with the other? Her questions suggest that as they grow up children of divorce could fall away from faith.”

If our view of God is driven by our relationship with our earthly parents, then that view must be skewed when those relationships are devastated by a divorce. The child of divorce is forced to reconcile things like the idea that:

- God never changes with the fact that life as they know it has irreparably changed.
- Unconditional love with the failed love of their parents.



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- A God who will never leave or forsake them with a father (or mother) who has.

As discussed in more detail below, there is a potential positive side to this whole process though. God as Father can become an appealing replacement when a human attachment figure is lost. Some children of divorce, when their questions are adequately addressed and the truth of Scripture is modeled for them, can and will turn to God the Father as a sort of “replacement” for what they have lost. This is why it is important that we help these children to understand the love of their never changing Heavenly Father and explain that He will never leave them or forsake them.

The report recounts a story included in a paper by [Chris Kiesling](#) about a man named John whose parents divorced when he was a child:

“John narrates the next decades of his life by saying that the spirit of fear transformed itself into a spirit that he would never be good enough, never measure up. For thirty years he tried diligently to construct a life that would bring wholeness. Until one day at church, the preacher stepped from his pulpit toward where John was sitting, looked at John and quoted a passage from Scripture that said, ‘I did not give you a spirit of fear but a spirit of sonship by which we cry out ‘Abba, father.’ John said that in that moment he knew who his father was, that he received in that moment a full measure of God’s mercy such that life has never been the same.”

A Destruction of the Domestic Church

Julie Rubio of St. Louis University refers to the family as the “domestic church.” It is in the context of family, after all, that many children first engage in practices that mark the Christian faith like prayer and serving. It is with parents that they say bedtime prayers, as a family that they pray over meals, in fellowship with one another that they celebrate milestones like birthdays and enjoy holidays as a family. If the home then is seen as the “domestic church,” then the divorce does not just force the child to learn to live in two different houses, they must also learn to adjust to the destruction of the “domestic church.”

Some studies have shown that it is these shared practices, traditions and rituals that lead to a strong faith in adulthood even more so than just the family structure itself.

many of these children (even those who attempt to continue going to church) end up separated from the congregation they once knew. The report explains,

“If we dig deeper into the inner lives of children of divorce, we learn even more. Scholars observe that children of divorce experience a disruption of the “domestic church” of their



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home. If they become alienated from formal religious practice they can experience a second silent schism in their lives—the first being the rupture of their parents’ marriage, and the second being the rupture of the child’s connection to a congregation and even to a life of faith.”

Children of divorce suffer two devastating schisms in their lives following a divorce – the rupturing of their parents’ relationship and the destruction of their connection to the church congregation and potentially even their faith.

A Shattering of Faith

Many children ALSO face a spiritual trauma when their parents divorce – particularly when they come from deeply religious homes prior to the divorce. This was demonstrated by a study done by Professor Annette Mahoney in a study of university students who found that college students who view their parents’ divorce “through a negative spiritual lens” feel greater distress over their parents’ divorce than those who do not perceive the spiritual component.

It stands to reason that children who look to their parents for spiritual guidance and a demonstration of faith would be rattled when those same parents ignore the teachings of that faith in pursuing a divorce. This blatant contravention of what they have been taught by those very same parents can leave them questioning not just their parents but the very faith that their parents have tried to instill in them.

An Ontological Impact

Finally, on the issue of why divorce affects a child’s faith, the report points to the work of Andrew Root in his book [*Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being*](#). [Root argues that divorce is an ontological loss for kids](#). It is not only mainly epistemological issue (such that a child must be constantly reassured that the divorce is not their fault) or a structural issue (in that children must be provided with adequate after school programs and child-support laws) that will help to solve the problem. In the end, divorce affects the child’s very sense of being, and it is in understanding that ontological impact of divorce that we can truly begin to help children find help and healing.

Because of the ontological nature of the loss children of divorce suffer, Root argues that faith communities can, and should, uphold the child’s ontology by reminding them of their importance to the group and helping them to realize that they are loved in the community. However, the community must also suffer with these children in the loss they have experienced.



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WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH THE CHURCH?

The report points to certain problems within the church that also lead to spiritual problems for children of divorce.

An Unspoken Focus

I have long suspected that many children of divorce and single parent families struggle in a traditional church setting because many churches, whether they would recognize it or not, are geared towards the traditional two-parent family. The study cites research by Penny Edgell from the University of Minnesota who “observed that congregations may be more welcoming to two-parent families, making it easier for such families to engage in congregational life.” Until we are willing to ask ourselves hard questions and examine the thought processes which underlie how we do things at the church, I fear that many churches will continue to project this image – many of them without even knowing it.

An Unwelcome Response

The study goes on to cite statistics from Elizabeth’s Marquardt’s study which we covered yesterday in the article titled “[The 6/50 Window: How the Church Has Failed the Child of Divorce](#),” showing that of those children of divorce who regularly attended church at the time of their parents’ divorce, two-thirds said that no one from the clergy or congregation reached out to them during their parents’ divorce and only roughly 25% remembered anyone reaching out to them from the church. Our own, more recent survey, indicated that no one outside of the child’s family reached out to over 80% of children questioned, and only 7% indicated that anyone from the church reached out to them.

An Uncomfortable Ear

The study also points out that many congregations are so close and so small that many “are conceived of as too familiar or too close a space in which to reveal one’s intimate troubles with a partner.” People don’t want the pastor or a congregation member to know the intimate details of what is going on in their lives. They don’t want to share marital issues or ask for help which might prevent the divorce in the first place, and they don’t want people to know that their kids are struggling. It is perceived as “too close.” This can lead to further isolation in the midst of a divorce. This is yet another result of a church culture which have us believe that only “perfect people” go to church when in reality we are all messed up sinners saved by grace and praying that God would continue to sanctify us and rebuild us in His image. Sadly, for children of divorce, this leads to an environment which does not encourage them, or their parents, to seek help, and they are left further isolated from the church community and from God.



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An Untenable Theory

Another interesting part of the report deals with the fallacy of the “good divorce” when it comes to a child’s spiritual life. The idea of the “good divorce” theorizes that what really matter to kids is not the divorce itself but how well parents handle the divorce.

In response to churches who would suggest that encouraging their congregants to engage in a “good divorce” is sufficient to prevent damage to a child’s faith journey, the report points out:

“...that those raised in happy, intact marriages were more than twice as likely to attend religious services, compared to those raised in good divorces. And, those raised in happy, intact marriages were more likely to report an absence of negative experiences of God, compared to those raised in good divorces.”

It turns out that the “good divorce” is actually an adult-centered view of divorce which does not reflect the child’s experience. Various studies have found little, if any, support for the “good divorce” hypothesis. In fact, some studies have shown that “children are harmed more by divorce if their parents had a low-conflict marriage than if they had a high-conflict one.” In a circumstance where parents had a low conflict marriage but still ended up getting a divorce, this can do significant harm to a child’s faith in the institution of marriage. In other words, the child is led to think, “If my parents, who rarely fought, couldn’t even make a marriage work, who can?” This is particularly alarming as approximately two-thirds of divorces end low conflict marriages.

IS THERE ANY HOPE?

The report’s executive summary ends with a word of warning and glimmer of hope for the church that we would do well to heed:

“The health and future of congregations depends upon understanding, reaching out to, and nurturing as potential leaders those who have come of age in an era of dramatic social changes in family structure. The suffering felt by children of divorce may actually offer a pathway toward healing and growth, not only for themselves but for the churches.”

All is not bad news according to this report. Melinda Lundquist Denton of Clemson University found that parental breakup during adolescence does indeed trigger some sort of change in the trajectory of a child’s religious life. For some, that change sends them down a path away from God and for others it seems to spur a move towards faith.



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In the hurt and pain and confusion that comes with their parents' divorce, some children turn to the church and turn to God for hope and healing. The report explains:

"...it may be that such suffering is a pathway toward a kind of healing, not only for grown children of divorce and others who experienced the breakup of their families, but also for faith communities."

This is the reason why ministering to these kids at their lowest points, at the point where their family is shattered, is so important. As the church, as the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, we can reach out to them and offer the hope and healing of a Savior, we can extend the invitation that comes from our Heavenly Father to join an eternal family with a Father who will never change and who will never leave. That is the unique hope that we, and only we, can offer to these kids.

In order to do this, our churches must be welcoming and inviting places for these kids and for their families. The report makes the following observation about the potential to be found in these circumstances:

"Reflecting upon all the papers commissioned for this project, it is clear that some from divorced families come to faith with a special depth and need. Yet it also seems possible that some individuals are willing to wrestle for so long that they develop the qualities of leaders. But in order to find a faith community and even perhaps become leaders, first they have to be welcomed."

Historically, churches have not done a good job in reaching out to these families. In her paper, Mary Ellen Konieczny recounts stories from some leaders in the faith community.

"It's just really hard to minister to them in meaningful ways because in lots of ways, they've checked out of the community.' A Catholic priest said with evident frustration, 'We have a lot of divorced kids [sic] in the school. Unfortunately, we never see their parents... Divorced people are not in our church. They send their kids to our school because God forbid they would send them to the public school, [and] they often have a little bit more money. They don't come to church and they're Catholic.' A mainline Protestant pastor, noting that there are no children of divorce in the youth group, said, 'It might be that we ostracize people who are divorced and have kids.'"

As for this, the report comes to a haunting, but true, conclusion:

"When parents do not involve their children in an active life of faith, churches seem bewildered about how to reach them."

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It may not be easy, and it will require churches to start thinking proactively and innovatively, but we cannot afford to stand by and watch the spiritual lives of these kids ruined as a result of their parents' divorce. As the church, we must take hold of the hope found in Jesus Christ and find ways to minister to these kids in their hour of greatest need. When they are reeling from their parents' divorce and everything that entails, we must offer the warm embrace of a loving God. When they are struggling with questions of why and how a loving God could allow this to happen to their family, we must help them to navigate those murky and treacherous waters of doubt and lead them to the solid ground of a firm foundation in God!

HOW CAN THE CHURCH HELP?

Following the findings of the report, there is a substantial section written by Amy Zietlow titled "A Plan For Congregations – A Mainline Protestant Pastor's Reflections." This section offers Ms. Zietlow's thoughts on what the church can do to minister to children of divorce. Her plan includes four observations (each of which is discussed briefly below):

1. Story Matters
2. Adult Role Models Matter to Youth
3. Being Genuine Matters
4. Holy Space Matters

Story Matters

We must help kids to process their story, including the painful parts of that story (like a divorce), within the greater context of God's story. Ms. Zietlow argues that this should be a priority for pastors, youth leaders and religious educators. She shares one idea from her own experience on how this might look from a practical point of view:

"I thought of how during confirmation classes each youth met with a faith mentor and wrote a 'statement of faith' that incorporated doctrine and the ways that he or she had seen God working in his or her personal and family life story. In the light of these papers, I would encourage mentors and pastors to invite a young person to think specifically about his or her parents' divorce in the context of writing his or her faith life story. Thus, the preparation for these rites of passage can provide an opportunity to explore how the story of this youth has been shaped by parental divorce, and to support this young person in writing a story of hope that incorporates the pain and loss of the divorce into his or her identity."



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Adult Role Models Matter to Youth

One constant in the papers commissioned for this report, and other sources, is the finding that kids “mimic” their parents in terms of faith. Uecker and Ellison conclude that:

“...most parents most likely will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves are.”

Sometimes in working with these kids we may be tempted to try to step in and fill the void as a substitute parental figure for a child of divorce. Ms. Zietlow argues, however, that the greatest potential for impacting children of divorce may come in “directly supporting the faith practices of divorced parents.” The role of fathers is particularly important, and Ms. Zietlow suggests ideas like having a frank one-on-one conversation with a divorced dad or setting up a men’s Bible study for divorced dads as avenues for having a positive impact on the future faith of their children.

In terms of working with children, Ms. Zietlow points out that pastors and those working with children in the church are in a unique position to “identify appropriate adults, from twentysomethings to grandparents, who might mentor and support a child of divorce.” Quoting from Christian Smith and Melinda Denton from their book *Soul Searching*, Ms. Zietlow emphasizes the unique position of the church:

“Religious congregations and other religious organizations are uniquely positioned in the array of social institutions operating in the US to embrace youth...[and] to strengthen ties between adults and teenagers. This could only be good for all involved. But it will not happen automatically. It will require intentionality and investment.”

Being Genuine Matters

Kids and youth care about whether you are genuine, and they are experts at figuring it out. Adult mentors must learn to be real and genuine with these kids if they are to be successful. Part of any plan for mentors of children of divorce should include providing the child of divorce with a safe place to speak and be heard. Ms. Zietlow writes,

“One of the most important tasks a pastor or youth leader can do for children of divorce is to create a safe environment to doubt, question, search, pray, struggle, and find hope, grace, and truth on their own terms. If you cannot listen openly and entertain the questions of a young person, then you will most likely fail.”



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She cites the work of Charles Stokes who wrote:

“Children of divorce felt alienated and/or awkward in church or synagogue. They had precocious questions that were rarely answered and sometimes belittled. But for those (few) children of divorce who made authentic connections in church and whose doubts and questions were welcomed, an enduring home away from home was found.”

Any mentor must be prepared to encourage, and work through, difficult questions that children of divorce will raise. With appropriate and engaged adult mentors, your church can become a home away from the chaos and confusion that can mark the life of a child of divorce.

Holy Space Matters

Finally, Ms. Zietlow points to the issue of space. Children of divorce may turn to the church building as a safe place – a refuge of sorts. She offers ideas like a divorce support group (I would recommend [Divorce Care 4 Kids](#) from Church Initiative).

WHERE CAN I FIND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION?

We will have more resources from this important report here on [DivorceMinistry4Kids.com](#) in the coming days and weeks as well as additional articles on the impact of divorce on a child’s faith as we continue to explore the [6/50 Window](#).

A complete copy of the “[Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith?](#)” report is available at <http://www.americanvalues.org/pdfs/SOFSF.pdf>.

The Center for Marriage and Families launched a separate website along with the release of the report. That site can be found at <http://www.centerformarriageandfamilies.org/shape-of-families/>. It includes links to many of the thirteen additional papers which were commissioned as part of the project and served as the basis for the report.

Finally, a symposium of 11 thought leaders on this topic was compiled by The Institute for American Values. You can find their thoughts on the report and the issues at <http://familyscholars.org/family-scholars-symposium-series/>.