



## THE 6/50 WINDOW: A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT THE SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

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By Wayne D. Stocks

March 26 – April 3, 2013 (originally published in three parts)



Welcome back to our series of articles about [the 6/50 Window](#). [The 6/50 Window](#) is a new name for an existing mission field for the Church represents the number of children of divorce who eventually end up as born again Christians with a biblical worldview (6%) as compared to the total number of children who will witness the dissolution of their parents' marriage/relationship (50%). We have also looked at how the church has historically failed children of divorce by failing to reach out to these kids in their hour of greatest need. In order for the [6/50 Window](#) to represent a viable mission field, it is important to establish that there is

indeed a spiritual impact of divorce. Those of us who work with children of divorce know intuitively that there is a spiritual impact, but the purpose of this article is to examine the statistical support for that assertion.

### ***A New Report***

Unfortunately, very little scientific study of this issue has been undertaken, but with the recent release of the [Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith](#) report, and the associated releases of related studies, the gap in research has closed somewhat. One particular study was performed by Melinda Lundquist Denton of Clemson University with the results released in the article, "Family Structure, Family Disruption, and Profiles of Adolescent Religiosity" published in [Journal For The Scientific Study of Religion](#).

### ***How Is This Study Different?***

The report explains that many of the reports that have been done thus far on the spiritual impacts of divorce on kids have utilized a "variable-centered" approach. In other words, they have measured the effect of divorce on one individual measure of religion. In other words, previous studies, for example, might have asked "What is the impact on divorce on a child's religious attendance?" or "How does divorce affect a child's prayer life?"

By contrast, Denton's current report takes a "person-centered" approach to studying the impact of divorce which accounts for the varied ways in which children understand and practice their religious faith. As such, it is better able to capture and analyze the "complex religious profiles of adolescents."

### ***The Impact of Divorce on a Child's Spiritual Development***

The report explains three ways in which divorce can impact of child's spiritual formation (two negative, and one potentially positive):

- 1) *Disrupted Religious Practice.*



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Divorce makes it harder for kids to get to church events and services. These are referred to as “practical barriers to continued religious practice.” Studies show that many parents leave church following a divorce, and children (in most cases) are subject to their parents’ attendance patterns. Even children who find their own way to church often fall away from the church after a time. Visitation patterns, moving neighborhoods and parents’ changing congregations or not attending can all work together to impact a child’s ability to be involved in the religious life of their church. Furthermore, things like working patterns (when a mother has to go back to work full time) can impact the child’s ability to make it to church events.

Oftentimes there are also emotional barriers to continued participation. Unfortunately, many churches are still not inclusive of non-traditional families causing children of divorce and their parents to feel unwelcome and unwanted at church.

### 2) *Sacred Loss and Desecration.*

Where marriage is viewed as having a sacred component, for example a biblical understanding of marriage as an institution created by God, the loss of that relationship is viewed not only as the ending of a relationship but also as a desecration of something sacred. Likewise, for kids who are raised in a faith where they are taught that marriage is a sacred institution, when their parents’ divorce they also experience that as a destruction of something sacred. This can be much more devastating than it would be to a child who did not view marriage in this same light. Obviously, this has the potential to adversely impact their view of God and other spiritual matters. Studies have shown that children who hold this heightened view of marriage also experience a “deepened sense of loss and violation” when the marriage is ended and may struggle with their own faith as a result.

### 3) *Religious Coping.*

Another train of thought, which is supported by some research, holds that children may actually turn to religion and the church for help and guidance in trying to deal with their parents’ divorce. This could be seen as a positive outcome in terms of the spiritual impact of divorce.

### ***A New Framework for Thinking About the Impact of Divorce on a Child’s Spiritual Development***

In order to test the spiritual impacts of divorce on Kids, Denton first sets forth a framework that acknowledges that when it comes to religion, teens (and people in general) fall much more along a spectrum than they do in one or two groups. So, she proposes that we think of religious adherence and spirituality along a spectrum which includes five distinct points known as the Five “A’s.” Each of these A’s represents one point on the spectrum, and teens for purposes of this study were grouped into one of five categories:



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- Abiders
- Adapters
- Assenters
- Avoiders, or
- Atheists

Respondents were classified into each category based on their responses to multiple questions in the areas of:

- Religious belief (beliefs about God and religion)
- Religious practice (regular practice of religion); and
- Religious importance (how important religion and God are).

The classifications are presented in the chart below:

Group	Question	Abiders	Adapters	Assenters	Avoiders	Atheists
Religious Belief	Belief in God	High	Personal and Involved God	Personal God	Some, distant impersonal	None
	Exclusivist attitudes towards religion	High	Not very exclusivist	Not exclusivist		None
Religious Practice	Frequency of prayer	High	Variance	Occasional Practice	Low	None
	Religious service attendance	High	Variance	Occasional Practice	Low	None
	Helping others outside of organized volunteer work	High	Variance	Occasional Practice	Low	None
Religious Salience/Importance	Importance of religion	High	High	Low	Low	None
	Closeness to God	High	High	Low	Low	None
	Frequency of thinking about the meaning of life	High	High	Low	Low	None
Description		Convention, institutional form of religion	“Spiritual but not religious”	Religiously “middle-of-the-road” youth	Nearly disengaged from religion	Completely reject religion

Let’s have a little closer look at each group as they provide a good framework for thinking about children of divorce and for thinking about all children who come through the doors of our churches.





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### Abiders

These can be characterized as the “yes” group when it came to religious belief and practice. They believe that religion is important and have an exclusive view of their religion. They believe that the church is important and their actions bear that out. They have a close relationship with God and pray frequently. The report explains that members of this group “reflect high levels of conventional measures of religiosity.” This group is known as abiders because they “seem to be living a rather conventional, institutional form of religiosity with expressions of organized religions that are mainstream in the United States.”

This group tends to have a relative stable lives compared to other groups. Their parents are most likely to have a college education and higher than average income levels. As children, this group is most likely to have parents who are also highly religious and who regularly attend church and engage in personal activities and practices based on their religion. As youth, it is abiders who are mostly likely to live with both of their biological parents for their entire lives.

### Adapters

Adapters could be described as Abiders who don’t believe in organized religion. This group is sometimes broadly classified as the “spiritual but not religious” group. They believe in God and classify Him as important, but they are less likely to engage in the community of a local congregation. The report explains that, “They also are the group most likely to be engaged in less conventional forms of religious expression, such as helping others or thinking about the meaning of life.” They are also more likely to hold a non-exclusive view of their beliefs than Abiders. This group has the largest representation of minority youth in their population. They also tend to have lower levels of parental income and education. They are also the group least likely to live with both parents in a stable home environment. They are given the name Adapters because they “appear to be living out their religiosity in adaptive ways.”

### Assenters

Assenters are described in the report as “middle-of-the-road” religiously, and they fall in the middle of the spectrum reflected in this report. While this group is likely to say that they believe in God and do engage in some level of religious practice, it does not play a central role in their lives. They aren’t likely to say they are close to God or rate the importance of religion to their daily lives as high. As youth, this group is also “average” in terms of parental income and education in relation to the general population. Like Abiders, this group tends to follow the religious practice of their parents. They tend to be affiliated with a religious organization but not engage in the activities and practices of those organizations to the same extent as Abiders.

### Avoiders



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Avoiders are “nearly disengaged from religion.” Avoiders tend not to be exposed to organized religion through their family and friends. For example, one-third of kids in this category have parents who never attend religious services, and their parents tend to be unaffiliated with a religious organization at a level twice the national average. However, they tend to maintain some semblance of believe in God (in some form) which keeps them from being in the next grouping (Atheists).

### Atheists

Atheists are the opposite of Abiders’s. Whereas abiders are across-the-board adherents to their religious beliefs and practices, Atheists completely reject all facets of religion including belief and practice. They are non-religious in all aspects. In terms of youth, atheists do not differ significantly from other groups in terms of living with both parents. Like Abiders, Atheist youth are characterized by families with higher than average income levels, and abiders and atheists share the highest percentage of parents with a college education.

### **The Basis of the Study**

This study was based on data collected as part of the National Study of Youth and Religion – a telephone survey of 3,290 teenagers which began in 2002-2003. During Wave 1 (2002-2003), 3,290 teenagers aged 13 to 17 were asked a variety of questions. Those teens were resurveyed in 2005 (Wave 2) when they were between the ages of 16 and 21 and again in 2007/2008 (Wave 3) when they were between the ages of 18 and 24. The results for kids included in all three waves (2,185) formed the basis of this analysis.

### **The Results**

The overall conclusion of the report can be characterized by the following excerpt:

*It appears as if the experience of parental breakup in adolescence triggers an increase in the odds of religious change, whether that change is a move toward or away from religion.*

Contrary to other reports, and common notions, that divorce doesn’t impact a child’s faith at all or has a clear negative impact, this report indicates one clear conclusion: divorce does increase the odds of a religious changes – sometimes in a negative direction, and other times in a positive direction. The key determiner seems to be where in the typology the child is when the divorce or separation takes place.

For Abiders and Adapters (the two groups with the highest view of religious salience (importance), they are “significantly more likely to experience a transition to a religious profile characterized by lower religious engagement.” For children in these groups, their faith and religion are viewed as very important, and they are therefore more likely to view the divorce of their parents as a “sacred loss.” As such, the impact of that “sacred loss” on their faith is more significant than youth who do not put such a high level of importance on their faith.

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Put another way, the dissolution of their parents' marriage (which they view as a sacred part of their faith) causes them to doubt and question other aspects of their faith and many times leads to a lessening or abandonment of that faith. Let's look at each group a little closer.

For Abiders (those kids with a high degree of both salience and practice), they showed higher odds of transferring to either Assenter, Avoider or Atheist (the lowest groups in terms of religious practice and salience). Abiders did not show higher odds of becoming Adapters following the divorce of their parents. This implies that the impact of divorce goes beyond just religious practice, but also includes the personal importance of a child's faith. In other words, it is not just the case that these kids can't get to church following the divorce but their faith remains as important to them. In actuality, both their attendance and the importance of the faith itself are at greater risk of decreasing following their parents' divorce.

Adapters, by definition, do not exhibit high levels of "institutional religious practice" to begin with, and as such this does not decrease following a divorce like it does for Abiders. However, like Abiders the importance (salience) of their faith is more likely to diminish following the divorce of their parents. Again, divorce represents a "sacred loss" to these kids, and the loss of things they hold sacred (their parents' marriage, and their intact family) causes them to question other sacred things in their life (like their view of God).

The results for Assenters reported in this study which quite different. Among Assenter, who were middle of the road in terms of both religious practice and importance, in turns out that many youth in this group actually turn to faith and religion as a means of coping with their parents' divorce. Many in this group have some history of religious practice (although it may be very limited), and faced with the trauma of their parents' divorce, many will fall back on this experience and end up turning to faith to help them through a time of crisis. By contract, Avoiders have had very little past history with religious practice and may not even be aware of faith as a potential "coping mechanism."

In summary, the findings of this report indicate that divorce of an Abider or Adapter's parents tends to have the impact of decreasing the importance of faith in their lives as they see the divorce as a "sacred loss" that causes them to question and doubt other aspects of their faith. On the other hand, Assenters whose parents' divorce may actually turn to faith as a coping mechanism.

### ***What Does It Mean For Churches and Children of Divorce***

The results of this report present the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. Those of us who work with children, and consequently children of divorce, must recognize that the potential impact of divorce is different for children depending on where on the spectrum they start. For the Abiders and Adapters, we must understand and accept that the divorce of their parents will likely represent a "sacred loss." This loss will cause them to question the foundation of their faith. We must recognize the likelihood of this happening and be there to answer their questions and help them to work through their doubts. Perhaps, with more involvement of



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caring churches, workers and congregations, the numbers of these Abiders and Adapters who slip into the lower categories of religious and faith practice can be curbed.

When it comes to Assenters, the church must recognize the potential of faith to be exactly the “coping mechanism” that these kids need to help them heal from their parents’ divorce. Like all people, Jesus comes to them at the lowest point in their young lives (as the breakup of their intact family) and offers the hope and healing that can only be found in him. When these kids come to our churches looking for healing, we must be prepared to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ to them.

As for Avoiders and Atheists, these youth are so far away from faith that divorce really doesn’t move them even further down the faith spectrum. As the church, though, we still understand that Jesus holds the key to healing them not only from the hurt of their parents’ divorce but to eternal life. We must continue to reach out to these kids and inviting them into the family of God.