



HOW DIVORCE IMPACTS A CHILD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

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By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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Over the last several weeks, we laid a foundation for examining how divorce affects the development of children (specifically spiritual development), how kids are wired to connect and recapped some of the impacts of divorce. Today, we are going to look more specifically at how divorce impacts the different areas of a child's development.

Development stops or is hindered at the time of the divorce.

Emotional/Social Development

Much of the literature and studies surrounding children of divorce focuses on emotional and social impacts of divorce. Often times, this development gets put on hold or gets stuck in anger following the divorce. Many adult children of divorce end up walking around as adults functioning on the equivalent of an eight or nine year old emotional level. Emotions may or may not improve with time, but most adults can fake it enough to survive and get by in an adult world. However, what is going on underneath the skin may be detrimental to their health and well-being as adults.

Cognitive Development

When parents get divorced, children's grades slip. Some children may have to repeat a grade. For the most part, children can't concentrate or focus. As time goes by the cognitive development will begin to get on track. However, the child may be so far behind they will need tutoring or special help to catch up or they may not graduate from high school let alone go to college. As the child grows into their adult years they may begin to learn the concepts needed to survive in a job on their own. Some will excel in a job. However, others will never reach their full potential.

Physical development

Although it is not spoken of as much as other effects, divorce can actually impact the physical development of kids. When children are under tremendous amounts of stress, skeletal and even muscle development can be slowed down. Over time the physical development will pick up, and they will begin to grow. Mental health professionals say they know when a child is processing their grief because they will witness a growth spurt. I saw one little boy grow three clothes sizes in eight months when he was put in a non-stressful environment.





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Spiritual Development

Spiritual development stops growing in a divorce situation. Many children can't or won't trust any parent-like image. They may get angry at God asking,

"Why can't you or why didn't you stop the divorce?"

What's interesting about the spiritual development though is so many children try to continue their relationship with the church right after the divorce and many try for several years. This could be because church attendance becomes a habit. It's part of the routine in a child's life. It might be that church attendance is one thing they feel they can count on to happen.

This is where we, as adults, fail the child of divorce. We don't encourage them or mentor them in their spiritual journey. For the most part, children's workers don't track and follow up with a child and the child gets lost in the shuffle when changing classes or programs.

One older man in a four-year old Sunday School class had a child whose parents were getting divorced. Right before the end of the year, this little boy shared that his dad had moved out. This little boy was about to move to the five year-old class, and this man had determined that he was going to call the teacher of the five year-old class and share this information with her. This man is unusual because most teachers don't follow the children forward and consequently when the child misses, no one follows up.

So many times the adults in the church fail the child because, over time, they lose interest in the individual child. If the child becomes a discipline problem, the church tends to shy away from that child.

The flip side of all of this is that God's people can play a vital role in the child's life through encouragement. In my own situation we had adults that assumed the parental role, temporarily, with my children. These adults connected with my children. They worked hard at maintaining a relationship with my children.

The other reason children try to maintain their church attendance is because now we know children have a need to believe in God. Everything around them is crumbling and they want to believe that God is real and that He will be there for them. This is especially true for children that have attended church on a regular basis with their families before the divorce.

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. Their spiritual development becomes frozen in time. Let me give you an example of what I mean.





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Several years ago found my husband and I were sitting in court with a father while his wife, the mother of his children, was being arraigned. She was in our DivorceCare (www.divorcecare.org) class, and the father had her arrested for slashing his tires.

As we spent the morning together I asked him if he knew Jesus Christ as his Savior. He surprised me by saying,

"Yes, I was saved when I was 11 years old."

I asked him several more questions to make sure he understood. He did. I believe that he understood and that he was saved. But then he said something that struck a chord with me. He said,

"We went to church a lot before I was saved. And then right after I got saved, my parents got a divorce. Within a year we just quit going to church. I know I should go to church now that I'm an adult and a father, but I have never developed the habit of getting up every Sunday. I work hard during the week, and I sleep in on Sunday mornings."

Is this man saved? God is the only one that knows that for sure. Does he have a faith walk? I don't believe that he knows what a faith walk is. His spiritual development is frozen in time. Spiritually he is still a new Christian on an 11 year-old boy level. He only knows the Bible stories from his youth. He only knows God from the memory of his youth.

Some children do turn to God. They replace the earthly parent that left with the image of God taking that role. I encouraged this concept in my own family. The first Easter after my divorce, my children and I were driving into the church parking lot when we noticed a friend in the church had set up a camera and was taking pictures. As we got out of the car Rodger said,

"Hey Julie and Brian bring your mom over and let's take a family picture."

My daughter screamed out,

"Don't you know we don't have a family? My Dad left."

She took off running into the sanctuary.

My son was a little quieter but his comments were just as severe. Very quietly while gritting his teeth he said,

"We don't have a dad anymore. He left! We don't have a family."

And he walked off with his shoulders slumped and his head down.





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After church I sat the kids down and told them we still had a family. My son said,

"Mom, look around. In case you haven't noticed Dad left. There is no dad in this house."

I explained that we still had a family; it was just a different kind of family. I told them that God would become the other parent in our home, that He was our heavenly Father. My son went on to say that while that was great,

"I need a dad I can talk to and one that talks back to me. I need someone with skin on them."

This was a perfect opportunity to talk about how we talk to God and how and when God talks back to us. Today my son has a deep faith walk. God is important in his life.

What Happens to the Relationship With God, the Heavenly Father?

These children of divorce that are now adults are speaking out. Judith Wallerstein's The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce the 25 Year Landmark Study followed a group of children of divorce for 25 years to record their experiences and development. You will find in that book that, for the most part, these children's view of marriage is skewed. The ability to commit to a relationship is shaky.

With the breakdown of the family unit and the inability to understand what a marriage is all about, some of these adults are left unable to comprehend Christ sacrifice for them. If they didn't experience salvation as children, it will be difficult for them to accept salvation as adults. If their parent left them; if their parent put their own needs over the child's, they may wonder how anyone could love them enough to lay down His life for them.

Think about this, our earthly marriages are to be a metaphor for Christ's love for His bride — the church. Marriage and family are earthly representations of God's design. God is the heavenly Father. Christ is His son. Jesus comes for his bride — the church. We can only understand this if we can think in abstract terms and understand the symbolism used in the Bible. We have to be able to comprehend and interpret scripture, the parables, and accept the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If a person is still on a child's level in their spiritual development, they will not be able to comprehend this beautiful picture.

We now have several reports and books written by adult children who experienced their parent's divorce. A very strong report was written by Elizabeth Marquardt, a scholar with the Institute for American Values, a think tank on family issues. She also served as the director of the Children of Divorce Project. In the first part of the project, 60 interviews were conducted with adults, half of whom grew up in divorced families and half of whom grew up





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in intact families. This was followed up by a survey of some fifteen hundred-telephone interviews. Elizabeth has included her research in her book, Between Two Worlds, The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce.

Elizabeth herself is a product of a divorced family. She believes that even under the best circumstances children of divorce will suffer emotional scars and their relationships will suffer including their relationship with God.

In conversations with Elizabeth she has relayed that one of the biggest issues she sees is the symbol of "God being a Father image?" and trust issues, "my own parent abandoned me and now you want me to believe in God, a heavenly Father image?"

She also says we have to be careful as a church body about how we approach some of these kids. We have to watch for defensiveness. If you say to a child that does have a good relationship with both parents, "you're Dad disappointed you or hurt you, left you," etc. they will get defensive. To them they have a relationship. It might not be a good relationship, but it's the only relationship they have known. A child will almost always protect their parent.

Most people at some point in their lives struggle with the question of:

"Is God real?"

The difference in the child of divorce is that they have to face this issue earlier than most people. Elizabeth says to tell the children this fact.

"Most people struggle with the realness of God but you are having to try and understand this earlier than others."

She says to try and say to the child,

"When you are alone and can't turn to your parent (for whatever reason) that God is always with you -- God can be there for you."

Also let the child know that they can come to you and talk with you about these types of things.

Jen Abbas is another adult that experienced her parent's divorce. Jen has written the book, "Generation EX." In her book she talks about the confusion children experience with the concept of love and how a child may feel like their needs were secondary to their own parent's desires. Now when they become adults they are told God loves them like a Father? Hmmm how much could that be if, as a child, their needs were secondary?

In a section in her book Jen writes:





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“As children of divorce, our initial understanding of our heavenly Father reflects the relationship we had (or didn't have) with our earthly dads. If the father we can see taught us by his choices that love is fickle, security is temporary and faithfulness is fleeting, it requires quite a leap of faith to believe that a heavenly Father exists whose love is unconditional, whose security is eternal and whose faithfulness is unfailing.”

Adult children of divorce for the most part do not attend religious services. Many feel like the church abandoned them when their parents divorced.

When adults hear the words, “Heavenly Father,” scenes of desertion and loss come to their minds. They don't think of God as a Father image. One lady said

“Just hearing, ‘Our Father’ would make a knot tighten up in my stomach.”

Other children feel unworthy of God's love. They feel unworthy to take their problems to such a God. They feel unlovable because they perceived that their parents didn't love them, they don't feel a God can love them either.

From an 11 year old in the book Growing Up Divorced by Archibald Hart we read,

“I wonder if God is like my dad. Does he say he loves you and then throws you away? Does he say he will come and visit you and then never come?”

Regarding trust Issues, children ask:

Is God like a Father? Because, if He is, I don't want to have anything to do with Him.

Regarding faith Issues:

I had faith that my parents would provide for me and look what happened and now you want me to have faith in ‘God’?

Bible Stories Can Be Meaningless

Partly because of the trust issues, the faith issues, their concern with safety and the unhealthy image of a parent, typical Bible stories are often meaningless to the child of divorce. When you think about the Bible stories we tell children most of them are really very scary.

Children in the Bible are left in a well, floated down a river in a basket, sold into slavery to pay their parents debts and even left behind while the family traveled. Children of divorce worry about these very things in their





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everyday life. They have concerns about who is going to take care of them. Are they going to have enough to eat? Will the parent they live with leave them and desert them like the other parent that left the home. It is their perception of things.

Even the story of Jesus being left at the tabernacle takes on a different meaning for the child of divorce. When a child in a two-parent family hears the story of Jesus being left behind when he was 12, they relate by thinking Mary and Joseph, the mother and father will look for Jesus. When they can't find him with his friends, they will go back to the town they had stayed at and look for him.

They may even discuss the story with their parents for reassurance that something like that won't happen to them. The child of divorce already worries that they will be left somewhere. They have no assurance that mother and father will come together to look for them. Many times they won't or don't talk to their parent about something like this. They let their imaginations run away.

Children's church workers need to be made aware of these issues. Special attention needs to be given to the child of divorce. It may be that an adult might need to take the child aside and reassure them. Or give the child an opportunity to discuss their fears and concerns about a particular lesson. If the child attends the church alone, chances are they will not approach the absent parent with questions or concerns about what they are learning. If your teachers don't take additional time and give extra attention to these children then, you will be sending them home in a state of confusion.

You will be failing this child because confusion already reigns in their lives. You also have to remember that many of these children will have parents that are not living a moral life. They come to church and we tell them to live a Christ like life but their parent, by their actions, may be telling them something different.

Next week we will examine what the church can do and why it is essential that we do something for children of divorce!

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 \(HLP4\)](http://www.hlp4.com) [<http://www.hlp4.com>]. 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.

