

Divorce and Its Affects on Children Ages 0 through 5

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Abstract

This paper reviews five books whose topics include information and guidelines concerning the affects of divorce on children. Divorce affects children in adverse ways, and the more informed the parent is concerning this the better able they will be to help their child(ren) through the process. Each book is relevant and is intended to help the parents, teachers, and any interested adult to aid the child through the stress of divorce.

God loves people so much that in Malachi 2:13-16, He said,
...You flood the altar with tears...because he no longer pays attention to
your offering...Why?...because you have broken faith with her, though
she is your partner the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord
made them one?...and why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring.
So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of
your youth. I hate divorce, says the God of Israel, (NIV)

These verses speak volumes about the devastation of divorce. God wanted us to
be aware of the fact that divorce affects one's relationship with Him. Breaking a covenant
with your marriage partner is breaking a covenant made with God. Breaking faith with
your husband/wife puts children at risk of not having a relationship with the Lord. The
problem then continues for generations to come. God loves us so much He never wanted
us to experience all the needless pain of divorce because of our selfish desires.

God also knew the difficult experiences that children would face as a result of their
parent's divorce. He wanted to spare them from these trials. God hates divorce because
He is aware of its devastation on the lives of those it touches.

According to the 1998 Census Bureau Report, in the 26 years between 1970 and
1996, the proportion of children under 18 years of age living in single parent homes grew
from 12 percent to 28 percent. Since 1972, one million American children every year see
their parents divorce. (divorcereform.org) We see the affects of this situation in the lives
of our children today. It takes on various forms such as, sickness, poor academic

performance and juvenile delinquency; and our society is being faced with its consequences not to mention how much our children are suffering.

Debbie Barr authored a book entitled *Caught in the Crossfire*; and although it was written in 1986, it is still a comprehensive and extremely informative book on the affects of divorce on the family members left in its wake. In her book she states,

Though many of us would still describe the typical American family as one in which the father is the sole breadwinner and the mother stays at home to raise the children, the surprising truth is that today only 7 percent of the population fits this description. (p. 16)

This statement was written in 1986. We can only imagine what the picture looks like 15 years later.

According to Barr (1986), divorce even has an affect on children in the womb. Since divorce affects the pregnant mother-to-be, it affects the infant too. As divorce causes high levels of stress, the fetus is affected by the chemicals in the mother's bloodstream. This stress can also cause fetal activity to increase as much as 300 percent. The result is often premature births and low birth weights. This causes babies to have trouble sleeping, cry more often, and have digestive problems. The strain is then increased for the mother trying to adjust to a newborn.

Barr (1986) also points out the affects on the infant because they "do not experience the routine care and play from their fathers." (p. 46) She writes that fathers are more likely than mothers to imitate, talk to, and rock their babies. Fathers hold their babies more often for play, and mothers hold them in order to take care of them. Mothers

play more intellectually with the baby while fathers are more physical in their play. Barr (1986) also points out that the participation of the father in the early care of the child creates the same bonding as is created between the mother and the child.

When fathers are absent from most of these experiences, the child suffers developmentally. God's design was for the child to be nurtured by the different but equally important styles of each parent. Barr (1986) also points out the fact that mothers who don't have the support of their husband behave differently toward their babies. The mother doesn't have the emotional and economical support the father is to provide. She experiences less of a sense of well-being, and is less confident in her mothering abilities. There is a direct correlation between the husband's involvement with his wife and the mother's involvement with her child.

Finally, without the financial support of the father/husband, new mother's are forced to put their infants in the care of another while they must work. This affects both the mother and the child in their ability to bond. The baby often spends most of its active time in the care of someone other than the mother.

The basic task of development during the first year is trusting or distrusting. Divorce can significantly affect this developmental process. A mother who is tired from working all day is less likely to be as responsive to the needs of her child as the mother who has the opportunity to stay home with the child. A newly divorced mother often experiences depression which again affects the way she responds or doesn't respond to her child. Babies who experience their parents divorce may also suffer from separation anxiety. The experience of divorce for the young child may affect his/her earliest forms of

attachment which in turn will affect how he/she will relate emotionally to others throughout their lifetime.

According to Barr (1986), “between a child’s first and second birthdays his basic developmental task is that of learning self-confidence.” (p. 52) Mothers experiencing divorce often tend to cling to their child for emotional security. The child is then hindered in his freedom to explore and investigate his world which undermines his self-confidence. Parents going through divorce may find themselves pushed to their limit as the child strives to establish his own identity. Children this age also need security. The lack of the father in the home may cause them to feel insecure and vulnerable. This may cause him/her to experience nightmares at this age and become less trusting later in life. At this age, the child may also regress to an earlier stage when he/she felt more secure.

Barr (1986) also brings out the fact that “babies and toddlers are the age groups least ready for any sort of shared custody.” (p. 54) It is recommended that the non-custodial parent visit the child rather than remove him/her from their familiar and secure environment.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5) have trouble verbalizing what is bothering them. Divorce can be an extremely confusing event for a child at this age. According to Barr (1986), “80 percent of the preschoolers whose parents are divorcing are given no explanation of any sort. One of the two most important people in their lives has seemingly vanished and no one even brings up the subject!” (p. 57)

Preschoolers see their parents as almost perfect. If one of them leaves, it can’t be the parent’s fault so they believe it must be something they have done. They experience

feelings of guilt. Often this is acted out in extremely good behavior believing if they are good enough the parent will return.

According to Barr (1986), in normal families little boys often fall in love with their mothers (the oedipal phase). They are forming mental models of the type of person they will someday marry. In intact families, this stage resolves itself naturally. Divorce interferes with this process. She states,

Nine times out of ten, it is the father who leaves the home. This is one reason why preschool boys have a more difficult time with divorce than preschool girls do. A boy may be guilt-ridden to think that he has actually won out over his father, as evidenced by his dad's departure. (p.58)

Preschool girls face a different problem when their fathers leave their home. They feel frustrated and rejected. They often deny that their father has even left and brag about their father's love and attention. They may fantasize about their father's love in an effort to maintain the idea that they are lovable and minimize the feelings of rejection.

According to Barr (1986), experts feel between the ages of three and eight are the worst time for parents to divorce. Unresolved issues often resurface during the teen years. Boys often adopt a hypermasculine style of behavior because they have never learned to be a man or handle their sexuality. Girls are often sexually promiscuous in an attempt to recapture their father's love. It should be pointed out here that these behaviors often exhibit themselves in teenagers who have had a father in their home, but he has never accepted his responsibility or taken the time to carefully and loving fulfill his duties as a father.

Preschoolers may also experience regression if divorce occurs at this age. An independent child may become dependent and whine or cry a lot. They may want to eat with their fingers, suck their thumb, or regress to wetting the bed. If their lives remain in turmoil this may last as long as a year. If things remain civil and relatively normal, the regression may not last long.

Barr (1986) does an excellent job in offering suggestions to help new mothers and young children through the process of divorce. This is always a difficult time, but her book gives excellent tips to parents struggling to help their children while coping with divorce themselves.

In their book, *Helping Children of Divorce*, Swihart and Brigham (1982) give some behavioral reactions that children typically experience as a result of their parent's divorce. They begin with *showoffs*. These "are children who deal with the stress of divorce by becoming boastful, boisterous, and rambunctious. They perform tricks." (p. 42) They try to attract attention. They feel this need for attention because often parents going through divorce are very preoccupied or depressed. They are having trouble dealing with the situation and have little time for the child. These children are not only releasing tension by acting out, but they are also revealing their lack of self-esteem. Swihart and Brigham (1982) suggest reaching out to the child without responding favorably to any inappropriate behavior.

The second behavior is *bullies*. *Bullies* are domineering, bossy, and always want to be in charge. They may eventually resort to hitting or becoming verbally mean to other children. They tend to see the world as "a cold and rejecting place that is treating them

harshly, and they in turn begin treating other people harshly.” (p. 44) According to Swihart and Brigham (1982), it is important to continue to reach out to these children with love and acceptance even though their initial reaction may be resistance.

The third reaction is the *loner*. These are “children who tend to be scared, self-condemning, and shy.” (Swihart and Brigham, 1982, p. 46) They seem to be dealing with their feelings by withdrawing. This is just the opposite of what they need. They need to focus their attention on others rather than themselves. Parents need to draw these children out and engage them in activities with others.

The next reaction is *clinging vines*. The authors define *clinging vines* as “children who become very dependent.” (p. 48) They tend to need adults to help them with the simplest of tasks even if they were previously very self-sufficient. They have fears of abandonment. Adults need to allow these children to do the tasks they are capable of so they can see that they can achieve goals. They need to be reassured of their capabilities. They also need to deal with the fear of abandonment.

The fifth reaction is being *everybody's friend*. These children try to please everyone. They become “very cooperative and compliant.” (Swihart and Brigham, 1982, p. 50) They are attempting to please everyone so that no one else will reject them. Parents need to help these children understand that they were not rejected and especially not rejected because they did something wrong. These children need to know they are accepted. They also need to know that they don't have to have everyone's acceptance. The problem with this behavior is that teachers or parents really like it when children are

behaving this well. Parents and teachers tend to forget that this behavior may be expressing needs in this child's life.

The next reaction is the *organizer*. According to Swihart and Brigham (1982), these children tend to organize their schoolwork, rooms, activities, and even their family. Their attempt to control the world around them is a result of their need to construct a sense of security and prevent any painful surprises. These children need to feel valuable and have the support of significant people in their lives.

The next reaction is the *grouches*. They get upset over the smallest things and are distressed over even the most minor changes in their world. They don't enjoy life and constantly complain. They display symptoms of childhood depression. Younger children cannot even seem to identify these feelings of anger. Adults need to help these children to deal with the hurt and anger. They need limits in which to feel accepted and still be angry.

The final reaction is called *little adults*. These children are trying to act mature and adultlike. They show very little emotion about the divorce and are in denial concerning it. These children shouldn't be praised for this behavior. Instead, they need the opportunity to be a child. They need the support of an adult they can depend on.

Swihart and Brigham (1982) also include a chapter for helping teachers in dealing with children of divorce. They end the book with a chapter for children. It is intended to be read to the child by the parent in order to help them understand the divorce and help them to know they are not the only ones who are experiencing the hurt involved.

Laurene Johnson (1990) wrote the book entitled, *Divorced Kids*. She does an excellent job of describing the loss children feel due to the divorce of their parents. She talks about divorce as a type of death. She walks parents through the grief process. Johnson (1990) also gives guidelines for visitation, communicating, discipline, nurturing self-esteem, enlisting the help of others, the extended family, and even prepares the reader for the unique experiences of the blended family.

Another book is entitled, *Marriage, Divorce, and Children's Adjustment* by Robert Emery (1988). This book is very research oriented and much more technical. This book is good for those who want to know what research has been done in the area of the affect of divorce on children. It was written in 1988 so there may be more current research being done in this area. This isn't a book that most parents would go to for guidance. It could answer questions about what to expect. Since many experts tend to give a negative outlook on the future for children of divorce, this book does give hope that all of these children will not be pathological. It does explain in a more technical way the changes to expect in children as a result of their parents divorce.

The last book for review is *Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids* by Michael Prokop (1986), who is a school psychologist. This is a book written for children ages 3 to 15. This is a rather wide span of ages and the older child may find it too childish. On the other hand, the younger children will need an adult to read the book to them and modify some of it to help them understand. The good thing about this book is that it tends to normalize the feelings and events that children are experiencing as a result of their

parent's divorce. It also walks them through the process of talking with a counselor about their feelings and experience.

Divorce presents a myriad of problems and much confusion for everyone involved especially children. Pre-marital counseling by a qualified counselor should be required for every couple who feel they want to get married. Divorce is too easy and acceptable in our society. Marriage takes commitment by responsible people and shouldn't be entered into believing there is an option if things don't work out the way they want it to. It is also one thing for two adults to make a decision to end their marriage if children are not involved, but no one should ever have children without being committed to providing a loving and stable home and family for that child. Our society has only begun to see the adverse affects divorce will have on our children.

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