

The Problem of Parental Divorce

I. The Effects of Parental Divorce

Countless scholars have conducted studies on the effects of divorce on children, identifying a wide range of results and responses, both immediate and long-term. There is certainly no good time for a young person to endure the divorce of his or her parents.

Youth may respond in multiple and varied ways to the news of their parents' divorce.

A. Denial

A common response to pain (especially mental and emotional pain) is denial. Some youth may respond to their parents' divorce by acting as if it isn't happening or by insisting to themselves that their parents won't go through with it.

- 1- A young person entertains a stubborn hope that Mom and Dad will soon get back together.
- 2- Another common form of denial manifests itself in a young person's refusal to admit, even to himself or herself, that he or she is upset in any way by the divorce.
- 3- In rare cases, a degree of relief at the breakup of the parents' marriage can be seen.

B. Shame/Embarrassment

Shame and embarrassment are common responses to parents' divorce among teens and preteens. Some are so embarrassed that they don't even tell their closest friends about what is happening in their families . . . even when those friends' parents are also divorced or divorcing.

Why can they be ashamed or embarrassed?

- 1-
- 2-

This especially affects a Christian youth. They may feel that biblical teachings regarding divorce condemn their parents and their family. If their parents have functioned as leaders in the church, youth may face even greater embarrassment as their parents strive to maintain their positions or relinquish their duties.

C. Blame/Guilt

Young children often attach huge significance to a single event in their immature attempt to determine the cause of their parents' divorce.

Often, the most memorable events in a child's mind are those that pertained to _____.

One child psychologist found that "almost three-quarters of the six-year-olds we studied blame themselves for the divorce."

For what reasons do they blame themselves for the divorce?

1- _____

2- _____

3- _____

D. Anger

Anger is among the most common responses to parental divorce.

- 1- Divorce disrupts family environment.
- 2- May resent being separated from one parent.
- 3- The young person may resent being different from friends who still live in intact families.
- 4- Physical and financial circumstances

Youth will respond to their anger in various ways.

1-They may release it by identifying with others through passive-aggressive behavior (such as "accidentally" hurting themselves).

2- They may project their anger onto others, seeing anger in others' words and behavior.

3- Those young people who suppress their anger may suffer heightened stress. They may experience anxiety attacks, which may include sweating, shortness of breath, body tremors, skin irritations, and even a state of severe, irrational panic.

4-They may experience nightmares at night and / or severe depression and moodiness during the day.

The primary purpose of anger, according to Dr. Richard A. Gardner, is to remove a source of irritation and frustration. Anger that is unresolved may lead to rage and eventually to fury.

E. Fear

They may entertain fears about where they will live, where they will go to school, or where they will spend vacations. They may fear the reactions of their friends, family, and church. They may fear total abandonment by one or both parents. They may fear "losing" their grandparents.

F. Relief

Some adolescents and preadolescents actually experience feelings of relief when their parents announce plans to divorce. To many youth the threat of a divorce is welcomed as the promise of relative peace and harmony.

F. Insecurity/Low Self-Esteem

Children of divorce are especially vulnerable to feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. Divorce "strikes" against an adolescent or preadolescent's sense of self-worth. Children of divorce often reason that their very existence brought about their parents' divorce; "if I had never been born," some may suppose, "Mom and Dad might still be together."

The circumstances surrounding a divorce often make it harder for either parent to give attention and affection to the children, the younger victims of divorce are likely to feel abandoned to some degree, and many assume that because they have been thus "rejected," they are therefore unlovable.

Many also feel stigmatized by their church or neighborhood because of the family split, and they accept that stigmatization as a reflection of their low worth.

Economic changes or hardships can also constitute, in a young mind, evidence of low worth. If the child is made to feel like an inconvenience to Mom and Dad, he or she may believe "I'm nothing but trouble; I'm not worth much to them."

G. Grief

After a divorce, children, teens, and adults alike sometimes go through stages of grief much as they would after the death of a loved one.

A sense of grief is nonetheless real, and often severe, to children of divorce. Grief is a healthy process, providing a period of transition and adjustment to a loss. The grieving process normally includes five stages:

H. Depression

Unless the news of a divorce occasions feelings of relief because of prior family conflict and upheaval, most adolescents and preadolescents will experience sadness upon learning of their parents' plans to divorce, and they will endure occasional moments of sadness as they adjust to the new state of affairs.

Depression, however, is a prolonged period of sadness, often intense.

You need to know what the symptoms of depression are. We have already studied those.

I. Alienation and Loneliness

Children of divorce—particularly adolescents— often experience a sense of alienation as a result of their parents' decision. They may feel somewhat estranged from one or both parents. They may feel alienated from their church.

Preteens may feel friendless, helpless, and alone.

J. Other Effects

These include academic problems, behavioral problems, sexual activity, substance abuse, or suicide threats and attempts.

Academic Problems

Behavioral Problems. Some youth exhibit behavioral problems in the wake of their parents' separation and divorce. They may begin smoking or drinking. They may start missing school. They may have trouble getting along with others. They may become disrespectful to schoolteachers and church leaders.

Sexual Activity. Research suggests that divorce may also, in the long term, prompt a higher degree of sexual activity and promiscuity.

Substance Abuse. Researchers have found a linkage between parental divorce and substance abuse.

Suicide Threats and Attempts. Occasionally, a young person's depression and despair over the breakup of the family will become so severe that he or she will threaten or attempt suicide. The youth may view suicide as a way to avoid the pain and grief engendered by the breakup of the family.

II. The Biblical Perspective of Parental Divorce

In the first days of human life, God devised a wonderful plan for humanity.

Genesis 2:18

18 And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.

Genesis 2:24

24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

God went on, in His Word, to further explain and amplify that first precept regarding marriage. Jesus, speaking specifically of the marriage commitment, added, "What God hath joined together, let man put asunder" (Mark 10:9).

"Put asunder"; separate, divide, depart, or go away

The apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote,

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

10 And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband:

11 But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.

Clearly, God intended our marital and familial relationships to be strong, loving, and lasting relationships that reflect the unity of God Himself. **Deuteronomy 6:4-** *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord."*

Unity is part of God's nature and character. He is one. And it is that unity that He wishes us to reflect in our marriages and family relationships. Marriage should reflect God's nature.

Children do not cause divorce. They can also not prevent it; nor does God expect them to. He does, however, command children (of all ages) to "Honor your father and mother" (Exod. 20:12) and to "Obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph. 6:1). Finally,

God makes it clear in His Word that the victims of broken families are of special concern to Him.

Psalms 65:8

8 They also that dwell in the uttermost parts are afraid at thy tokens: thou makest the outgoings of the morning and evening to rejoice.

Psalms 10:14

14 Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: the poor committeth himself unto thee; thou art the helper of the fatherless.

God does not frown on those whose parents or spouses have left them; He does not turn a deaf ear to the painful cries of those whose families have been shattered by divorce . . . nor should His people.

Conclusion:

Be sure and study what our response should be to young people whose parents are facing divorce. Study what we are to do in that situation.

Single Parent Families

I. The Problem of Living in a Single-Parent Family

Many children born today will live continuously with their own mother and father through childhood. Most American children will spend several years in a single-parent family."

Single parenthood may occur because of divorce, desertion, or death, or because a woman has a child outside of marriage.

Single parents must face "too many decisions that have to be made without the consultation of another partner, too many jobs to be done by one person, . . . too many tensions and frustrations that seemingly have only intermediate solutions, and too little time apart from child rearing that [can be claimed as one's] own."

There are monumental problems single parents face. Among these are: financial struggle as well as the child's academic problems, behavioral problems, and sexual activity.

A. Financial Struggle

Many single mothers are living below the poverty line.

B. Academic Problems

Thomas Ewin Smith (1990) found that adolescent children of single mothers exhibit a lower "academic self-concept" than children living with both biological parents. Other research indicates that children from two-parent families have better grades and higher academic achievement than children in one-parent families.

C. Behavioral Problems

Name three of those problems on your note sheet:

- 1- They may begin smoking or drinking.
- 2-
- 3-
- 4-

Such behavior is often an expression of anger or confusion, a response to the emotional turmoil they feel—but cannot adequately express—because of their family situation.

D. Sexual Activity

Prompts a higher degree of sexual activity and promiscuity. While adjusting to and living in a single-parent family can create complex problems and considerable challenges, it does not seal a young person's fate.

II. The Effects of Living in a Single-Parent Family

Whatever the circumstances leading to the establishment of a single-parent home—some of the effects that are likely to be felt by a young person include shame or embarrassment, guilt, rejection, anger, insecurity and low self-esteem, and withdrawal.

A. Shame/Embarrassment

Shame and embarrassment are commonly felt by teens and preteens living in a single-parent family. They may be embarrassed because of their parents' divorce, interpreting it as an indication that there is something wrong with their family.

They also may assume that they bear a degree of responsibility for their parents' breakup.

They may be embarrassed by what they consider inappropriate conduct on the part of their parents following the divorce (such as Dad dating a younger woman) or by the abrupt changes in their style of living (such as moving into an apartment with Mom).

B. Guilt

Research shows that children of divorce tend to assume blame, or at least part of the blame, for the failure of [their parents'] relationship.

They say, "Well, maybe I made too many demands; maybe they spent too much money on me. They argued about me a lot of times."

When the single-parent family has been created by the death of a parent, the teen or preteen "may believe himself to be responsible for the death and such a responsibility will create guilt."

C. Rejection

Whether the parent has left by death or divorce, the child still experiences a sense of rejection." Teens are acutely sensitive to rejection, either expressed or perceived, and they may even harbor feelings of rejection because their single parent, struggling mightily—and alone—with the demands of parenthood, is not home much of the time, or must occasionally miss important events.

D. Anger

In the midst of their confusion, children will feel angry. In the case of a death of a parent, the child will find himself experiencing a sense of anger, feeling that he has been cheated, that he has been deprived of the support and love of that parent.

E. Insecurity/Unhealthy Self-Esteem

Whether the single-parent family is caused by death or divorce, youth in such families may be especially vulnerable to feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem.

Stigmatization may also occur (or be inferred by youth) because of a parent's behavior (alcoholism, promiscuity, abusiveness), which can strike a crippling blow to a young person's self-esteem.

Economic changes or hardships can also constitute, in a young mind, evidence of low worth.

F. Withdrawal

"When relationships have hurt us," writes Hutchcraft, "we tend to pull in, withdraw, and not talk, love, or care." They may feel somewhat estranged from one or both parents. They may feel alienated from their church, even when they have experienced no unpleasant or judgmental reaction from church members or leaders. They may feel suddenly distant from their friends. They may feel deserted and rejected by God Himself, and will frequently wonder how God could allow such a thing to happen to their family.

III. The Biblical Perspective of the Single-Parent Family

God's prescription for the creation and maintenance of a family is recorded in the Creation account.

Genesis 2:24

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

God ordained that children were to come out of the unity of a man and his wife, and that the mother and father would thereafter cooperate in raising a family. God designed the family to create a stable loving family environment for raising a child.

While Christians must acknowledge God's plan and His ideal, we must also face the fact that the ideal does not always happen. A child is conceived out of wedlock. A parent dies. Mom and Dad divorce. A single parent family results from those things.

While single parenthood is a less-than-ideal situation, it is not an impossible situation.

From all indications, Jesus was the product of a single parent home! Mary, the mother of Jesus, apparently became a single mother sometime after Jesus' twelfth birthday, for Joseph never appears in the Gospel accounts after that point.

Paul's young disciple, Timothy, may likewise have been the product of a single-parent home. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul refers to his friend's "grandmother Lois" and "mother Eunice," but makes no mention of Timothy's father."

God said He was "a father to the fatherless and a judge for the widows" (Ps. 68:5). God loves those who are without parents or spouses too. He made that clear in passages such as the following:

Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.

Deuteronomy 24:19

19 When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands.

Isaiah 1:17

17 Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Scripture instructs husbands to:

Ephesians 5:25-30

God's will is for His unity to be expressed in the family; but He has also chosen to reveal His oneness in the institution of the church—His body. Just as a man and woman shall

leave mother and father and become one flesh (see Eph. 5:31), so Christ has become one with the church—His body. The person who trusts Christ as Savior is adopted into a living family, a family that is intended to reflect the unity of God Himself.

Jesus Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit so that we may experience unity, so that "all of [us] may be one [that we may] be brought to complete unity" (John 17:21, 23).

Conclusion:

The single parent who becomes involved in the local body of Christ, a local church, can experience— and expose his or her children to—a living, thriving family that can compensate, in some ways, for the loss of a husband, wife, father, or mother.