

Practical Ministry Skills: Ministering to Children of Divorce



Leader's Guide	2
NO SUCH THING AS A "GOOD DIVORCE" <i>by Amy O'Brien</i>	3
MINISTERING TO PART-TIME KIDS <i>by Brian Dykes</i>	5
AS IF THEY NEVER EXISTED <i>by Amy O'Brien</i>	7
COMMON EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS <i>by Wayne Stocks</i>	10
FAITH THROUGH THE LENSE OF DIVORCE <i>interview with Elizabeth Marquardt</i>	12
A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THEIR NEEDS <i>by Amy O'Brien</i>	15
Resources	
FURTHER EXPLORATION.....	18



Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to a children's ministry resource from BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you minister effectively to children of divorce. Selected by the editors of Building Church Leaders, the material comes from respected children's ministers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and offers brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. You may use these handouts at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This special theme on **Ministering to Children of Divorce** is designed to help lay a foundation for effective ministry to children with divorced or separated parents. You may either use these handouts for personal development or for a group training session. Or you may choose to provide copies to the church board, staff members, or those involved with specific ministry teams at your church. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For help in understanding issues related to children of divorce, see "No Such Thing as a 'Good Divorce'" (pp. 3–4) and "As if They Never Existed" (pp. 7–9). To better understand the behavior and emotions of these struggling children, see "Common Emotions and Reactions" (pp. 10–11). In "Faith Through the Lense of Divorce" (pp. 12–14), you'll discover insights into how children of divorce view God and faith. Find help for effective ministry in "Ministering to Part-Time Kids" (pp. 5–6) and "A Program That Meets Their Needs" (pp. 15–17).

We hope this training tool will guide your efforts to better understand and reach out more effectively to children of divorce.

Need more material or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

To contact the editors:

E-mail BCL@christianitytoday.com
Mail BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS, Christianity Today
465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188



No Such Thing as a “Good Divorce”

We need to own up to the long-term impact divorce has on children.

Matthew 19:1–10

Most likely you know someone who has been divorced, know a child with divorced parents, or have even experienced divorce yourself. And you’ve probably heard people talk about a “good divorce.” The research would indicate otherwise. In *Children of Divorce*, Andrew Root gives us a synopsis of the problem and its disruptive, life-altering impact on children:

Since the 1970s divorce has become a common cultural reality. With the creation of “no-fault” divorce, many were freed from unhappy and unfulfilling marriages. For a generation of young people born in the late ’60s and after, divorce is as familiar as Froot Loops and cable television. Parents have been told that if done right, their divorce can be only a minimal disturbance to their children, on a par with changing schools or moving to a new neighborhood. But lately the young people who have lived through and with the divorce of their parents have questioned this assertion. In biographical books like Stephanie Staal’s *The Love They Lost*, screenplays like Noah Baumbach’s *The Squid and the Whale*, and popular music like Blink 182’s “Stay Together for the Kids,” Papa Roach’s “Broken Home,” or Pink’s “Family Portrait,” the initial and continual pain of their parents’ divorce has been expressed palpably. It may be, as Staal asserts, that divorce is the defining generational mark of those raised after 1970, as the Kennedy assassination was for our parents, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor for our grandparents.

As Root explains, in the past parents have been told that a divorce, if handled correctly, was ultimately more of an inconvenience than a tragedy. If the parents were civil and were happier in the end, their child would benefit, right? Consider a scene from *Sesame Street*, as described in *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* by Judith Wallerstein:

In July 1999, *Sesame Street* aired an episode in which Kermit the Frog, dressed as a reporter, interviewed a little bird asking her where she lived. The happy little bird chirped that she lives part of the time in one tree where she frolics in her mother’s nest and the rest of her time in a separate tree where she frolics with her dad. The little bird concluded merrily, “they both love me,” and ran off to play.

This scene illustrates how many of us have been instructed to think about divorce. Although it might take some initial adjustments, it shouldn’t cause any long-term harm. Children whose parents divorce can be the innocent little bird who happily flits between her parents’ homes.

Judith Wallerstein disagrees. Wallerstein studied the effects of divorce on children in a 25-year study. In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, she reports her findings. Of her own experience working with these children, she writes:

When I began studying the effects of divorce on children and parents in the early 1970s, I, like everyone else, expected them to rally. But as time progressed, I grew increasingly worried that divorce is a long-term crisis that has affected the psychological profile of an

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

entire generation. I caught glimpses of this long-term effect in my research that followed the children into late adolescence and early adulthood, but it's not until now—when the children are fully grown—that I can finally see the whole picture. Divorce is a life-transforming experience. After divorce, childhood is different. Adolescence is different. Adulthood—with the decision to marry or not and have children or not—is different. Whether the final outcome is good or bad, the whole trajectory of an individual's life is profoundly altered by the divorce experience.

The research is clear, where the child is concerned, there is no good divorce. Civil divorces are better than nasty divorces. And sometimes divorce is necessary (as in instances of abuse). But Scripture is also clear: Divorce is not God's intention. And one reason among many: Divorce is a devastating event that takes its long-term toll on children.

—AMY O'BRIEN is minister of Christian education at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Warrenville, Illinois; she earned a master's in Christian formation and ministry from Wheaton College Graduate School; she has worked with children in various capacities for more than 10 years.

Discuss

1. What is most surprising or unsettling about the information offered in this article?
2. Do you think our church accepts or challenges the idea that there are “good divorces”? Explain your answer.
3. What can we do better in our efforts to minister to children of divorce?

Action Points

- Don't minimize a child's experience with divorce. Because we want to encourage the children in our ministry, it is easy to inadvertently minimize the pain they are feeling. Instead of saying, “Everything will be fine,” acknowledge their pain. Say, “I imagine what you are going through is very difficult. I'm so sorry.”
- Be prepared to see different “side effects” of the divorce pop up at different times. Every child will deal with their feelings differently. Don't be surprised if a child who seems okay with their parents' divorce today begins to really wrestle with it a year from now.
- Know your children. The best way to help the kids in your ministry cope with divorce is to know them personally. This will enable you to know when they are acting out of character, which can be a signal that they need your special attention.



Ministering to Part-Time Kids

What do you do when kids miss church because they're visiting the "other parent"?

Mark 10:13–16

It's Sunday morning and you're optimistic. You have enough material for every child on your class roster, and you're excited about what you've planned.

When class begins, however, only half the class is present. Two families are on vacation. One child is sick, two are with their fathers, and one is with his mother for the weekend. You can understand the vacation and the illness, but the children you see only 50 percent of the year because of divorce really bother you. How can you minister to these part-time kids—children of divorced and separated parents?

Reaching Families

The church can serve as a healing community to provide hope and help for families who've experienced divorce. Even though we have less time with these children, we can meet the needs of the parents and the children. Here's how.

Speak kindly about both parents. Encouraging words may be lacking at home. Anger and hostility are often the driving forces between separated or divorced parents. Focus on the positive aspects of each parent when you're with the child.

Open up a dialogue with each parent. Tell each parent that you're interested in the child and want to be available to the child. Update both parents on events, projects, successes, and struggles that the child experiences.

Be aware of potentially sensitive situations. One delicate area revolves around the specific legalities involved in each divorce. One parent may have lost parental rights and may be legally prohibited from having any contact with the child. Or a court may decide that one parent is not obligated to know any information about the child.

The circumstances around the divorce may have involved abusive behavior. If a child confides about a possibly abusive situation with either parent, assure the child that such behavior is not appropriate. Immediately confer with your pastor and Child Protective Services in your county.

Support families. Encourage your church to provide resource people, workshops, and support groups. Since many parents have been out of the single social scene for years, sessions on improving social skills may be helpful. Practical workshops on car repair, finances, home repair, résumé writing, conflict resolution, and time management can help the family save money and decrease frustration.

Provide positive adult relationships for adults and children. A mentor will help a child by providing interaction with another adult and can give the parent a break from the strains of constant parenting. An Adoptive Grandparents program in your church can also be a positive resource and can give older people an avenue for service. Likewise, an adult peer mentor for the parent can help guide the divorced person in times of great anxiety and frustration.

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Accommodating Kids

When we help strengthen the parents, we also strengthen the child. As children see their parents thrive as singles, children will feel more secure. But don't stop there. Plan special ways to make your program a healing place for children.

Create a children of divorce support group. This group can meet the same time as an adult group meets. Address emotional and practical issues in these sessions.

Work to create warm, inviting classrooms. Remove attendance posters so children don't feel bad about their absences. Mail any class projects, lessons, or student pages to the part-time students ahead of time. Also consider contacting the child's Sunday school teacher in the child's other church. Find out what they're studying and incorporate it into your lesson time. This will help the child feel important and will allow you to reinforce lessons for the child.

Drop curriculum that can't stand alone. If your curriculum is designed so that each week builds on the previous one, don't use it with part-time kids. They'll feel lost and left out. Use curriculum with lessons that can stand alone from week to week.

Inform kids of upcoming events. Try to schedule events to fit a part-timer by finding out when the child is likely to be present. Don't add to the child's anxiety or guilt if the child must miss an event. Instead of saying, "We'll miss you next week," say, "I hope you have a great time with your mom next Sunday."

Ministering to part-time kids is challenging, but it's also rewarding. These children need your love, and their parents are hungry for healing. Help children feel less like pawns and more like valuable people in their new family structures and in the family of God.

—BRIAN DYKES works with children at his church in Greenville, Michigan; adapted from an article that first appeared in *Children's Ministry Magazine* (www.childrensministry.com), © 2011 by Group Publishing Inc., 1515 Cascade Avenue, Loveland, CO 80538. Reprinted by permission.

Discuss

1. The article encourages us to "be aware of potentially sensitive situations." What sensitive situations do we currently have in our ministry? What guidelines or policies are in place for dealing with these sensitive situations? What changes might we need to make so that we can properly deal with sensitive situations?
2. In what ways are we currently making our ministry a healing place for single parents? What ideas from the "Reaching Families" section should we seriously consider implementing?
3. In what ways are we currently making our ministry a healing place for children of divorce? What ideas from the "Accommodating Kids" section should we seriously consider implementing?

Action Points

- Hold a training session focused on helping your staff and volunteers know how to handling sensitive situations.
- Meet one-on-one with volunteers who lead children from divorced homes. Hear their concerns and seek to answer their questions.
- Develop a plan of action for ministering more effectively to children of divorce and their families. If you currently have a plan, review it with your team and looking for any changes that need to be made.

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE



As if They Never Existed

When parents divorce, a child's core identity is threatened.

2 Corinthians 5:11–21

“Children are resilient. Don’t worry, they’ll be fine.”

We’ve all heard comments like this one or even said them ourselves to someone going through a divorce. More often than not, we say this because we desire to comfort the parent. What the parent is experiencing is devastating and life-changing. The last thing we want to do is add further hurt or guilt by implying that they are forever damaging their children. We need to take parents’ pain seriously and minister to them.

However, think about what such comments inadvertently communicate: While what the parents are experiencing is heart-wrenching, the child is merely experiencing a bump in the road. Comments like these disregard what the child is experiencing as insignificant because it is temporary, it will pass. However, this is simply not the case. Studies have shown that a divorce profoundly affects a child developmentally, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. And the greatest impact of a divorce, for even a very young child, may not be felt until they are an adult. Why?

The Loss of Identity

Think back to the movie *Back to the Future*. A young man, Marty McFly, travels back in time to when his parents were young and starting to date. As can be expected, a series of mishaps occur that ultimately have Marty concerned that he may not be able to get his parents together. And as devastating events unfold that put in jeopardy this future union, Marty begins to disappear. If his parents never get together, then Marty never existed.

It’s only a movie, but it’s a powerful visual for how divorce impacts a child. *In Children of Divorce*, Andrew Root defines one of the primary problems a child of divorce faces: the loss of identity. Root explains:

The child is because of the union of his or her biological parents. Without them, he or she is not. When divorce, separation, or extended absence occurs, the biological parents say, possibly with words but definitely with actions, that they desire for their union to no longer be. But the child is the result of their union; the child has his or her primary being in relation to the community called family.

The child doesn’t only suffer; their core identity is threatened. They are robbed of the ability to move forward the way they had in the past. Now, that is not to say that the way the divorce is handled is not important. I think specifically about my husband’s experience. His parents divorced when he was young. When Brandon’s father sat down with him and told him that he no longer loved Brandon’s mother, Brandon’s world was devastated. And though that might not have been the best thing to say, from then on the divorce was handled as well as could be expected. Brandon’s parents didn’t fight. His dad chose to stay local so he could see Brandon all the time, and he didn’t petition for custody so as to spare Brandon undue harm. Child support payments were on time, and everyone was treated with respect. In fact, even later when both parents had remarried, Brandon remembers having all four of them sit together at baseball games to cheer him on.

From an outsider looking in, things had worked out pretty well. But from Brandon’s perspective, his life and identity had been changed without his consent or choice. He now had to consider what he said to each parent so as to preserve the reputation of the other. He had to learn to get along with two step-parents that he did not choose, and when he was a teenager he had to welcome a younger brother and sister. As Brandon became an

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

adult and established serious relationships, he discovered a deep seated fear of abandonment. It didn't matter how good of a friend or girlfriend someone was, they could one day decide to leave, and he might never know why.

Now imagine a situation where fighting is rampant, guilt is regularly induced, and the child is caught in the middle. Imagine if that child has little supervision and is left to his or her own devices during the teenage years. If my husband's experience had him fighting to establish a new identity, imagine how children feel who regularly hear their parents talk disparagingly about their former spouse or marriage. If these parents wish they had never been together, might their own child wonder if his or her very existence is, in fact, a mistake?

Scripture is clear that two shall become one in marriage. And in this union they create a child. We cannot underestimate the effect on the child when this union dissolves, because without it the child never would have existed. And herein lies the identity crisis for the child. They must now learn to "be" in a world where absolutes (i.e. "mommy and daddy always love each other") seem not to exist. They must learn to live in a world they no longer understand. Even in cases when a divorce is a welcome relief and will ultimately benefit the child (e.g. freeing them from abuse, etc), we must recognize that an identity crisis is still a part of this journey.

Disrupted Routines and Lives

For a preschool aged-child, divorce often disrupts the routine that is so important to their development. Young children need a routine complete with bedtime, naptime, playtime, snack time, mealtime, and times of learning. Often in the case of a divorce, a child's routine is forfeited as the mother or father embarks on a new era of life. The parent who previously had not worked now has to establish a career with skills they either never had or have let lapse. This means increased work hours, possibly going back to school, and financial strain. Outside caretakers are responsible for very young children and older kids are allowed to care for themselves (and even their younger siblings) long before they should. Young children may feel as if they are being left alone because their parents no longer care. Older children, who are better at understanding the situation, may become angry or bitter at their parents' choices. They may also feel as if they have to take sides, to choose to defend one parent or the other.

These children are forced into choices they're not equipped to handle. For example, they may now have to choose which parent they will spend a particular holiday with. They can no longer share everything with both parents. In cases where forced visitation is implemented, the child must regularly leave their friends and their community against their will. Many of these children travel long distances to visit the parent that moved away. These children often don't have time to move through developmental stages in a healthy manner. And then consider those situations where a child is lavished with gifts or extra freedoms (out of a parent's sense of guilt). When you combine these factors, and others unique to each child's specific situation, the impact is truly devastating.

The Good News of a New Identity

In the midst of all the difficulties and painful realities, there is good news. In 2 Corinthians 15:17 (NIV), the apostle Paul writes: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" In Christ we find a new identity. This provides hope for all Christians. And it is the hope that we offer to the child caught in their parent's divorce. This is good news!

So what does all of this mean for us as ministers? A lot of the resources aimed at equipping children's ministers or pastors to minister to the children of divorce focus on the practical—dealing with issues of spotty attendance, security concerns in cases of a custody battle, or how to explain a divorce to the other children. These are important topics. We need to be aware of these issues and provide a classroom environment that is welcoming and nurturing and safe. However, too often we stop here. If we do not move beyond these concerns we will be doing the child a great disservice. No matter the circumstances—how divorced parents relate to each other, age of the child, economic situation, etc.—what the child is experiencing will ultimately define their next steps and even their future choices. The church can be a part of that journey as they acknowledge the

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

difficultly the child is facing. And in the long run, they can help that child develop a new and healthy identity in Christ.

—AMY O'BRIEN is minister of Christian education at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Warrenville, Illinois; she earned a master's in Christian formation and ministry from Wheaton College Graduate School. She has worked with children in various capacities for more than 10 years.

Discuss

1. What do we often say to parents to help them through a divorce? What do we often say to children to help them deal with their parents' divorce? How are our words helpful? How might they be hurtful?
2. What are the positives of seeing children as "resilient"? What are the negatives of seeing them this way?
3. As you think about adult children of divorce in your own life, can you see evidence of the divorce in some of their habits or even in their conversations?

Action Points

- Keep in mind that misbehavior might be a symptom of deeper issues. During and after a divorce, a child's role in the family can change from simply being the child to being a mediator between parents, the protector of one parent or the other, the caregiver of younger siblings, or the "man" or "woman" of the house. This puts kids under a lot of pressure. While rudeness and disrespect should never be tolerated in, say, a Sunday school class, we must also avoid assuming misbehavior is a sign that the child is simply "being bad." This is especially true if the child was obedient and well-behaved before the divorce.
- Get together with your team and brainstorm ways you can help children of divorce understand their identity as beloved children of God.
- Give children a chance to serve. Consider the story of "Thomas" (not his real name), a middle-school aged boy. As his parents were in the process of separating, Thomas asked for the opportunity to help cook the meal for an outreach program. Our adult coordinator wisely let him help, and she served as his "sous chef." The meal was simple and it was well prepared. But more importantly, Thomas felt valuable, useful, affirmed by the adults around him. It has to be done with wisdom and discernment, but allowing kids to serve can help tremendously.



Common Emotions and Reactions

What to watch for as you seek to minister.

Romans 12:15

While each child is clearly unique, and each divorce is unique, here are some common emotions and reactions that many children of divorce demonstrate:

- Children of divorce are always missing someone. Kids love their parents and generally don't understand why they can't get along. When they are with Mom, they miss Dad and vice versa. This will continue for their entire childhood, and likely beyond.
- Divorce shatters a child's foundation. Everything they have believed in and everything they have counted on shatters in an instant. They begin to question (throughout their childhood) all aspects of their lives.
- To a child, divorce is not a single event. It is a trigger that changes their lives forever and which they may never fully recover from.
- Children who spend time in different homes with two different families often report that they feel like two different people depending on where they are staying.
- The rituals that a child has become accustomed to are often shattered during a divorce. Children desire ritual, and they are likely to replace these lost rituals with unhealthy ones if healthy alternatives are not provided.
- Younger children are likely to regress in their behavior as their parents move through the divorce process.
- Divorce is something that children need to grieve. However, their grief does not move along a straight line. Instead, many children are likely to re-experience the grief of their parents' divorce as they move through each developmental stage.
- Many children experience the loss of childhood as they are expected to take on many more adult responsibilities.
- Many children of divorce start to tackle deep spiritual questions earlier in life. They are faced with questions like, "Why did God let this happen to my family?" and "Why didn't God answer my prayer for my parents to get back together?"
- Some of the common emotional responses of children of divorce include:
 - Anger
 - Aggressiveness
 - Anxiety
 - Confusion
 - Denial
 - Depression
 - Loss of Control
 - Resentment
 - Sadness
 - Guilt
 - Fear
 - Stress
- Children can manifest the feelings they have about the divorce in any number of ways. These include:
 - Acting out
 - Pretending everything is fine
 - Withdrawal
 - Complaining
 - Attitude and discipline problems
 - Self-destructive behaviors
 - Being clingy

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

—[WAYNE STOCKS](#) is a contributing writer for [Ministry-to-Children.com](#) and oversees [Divorce Ministry 4 Kids \(DM4K\)](#); adapted from an article that appeared on [Ministry-to-Children.com](#). Reprinted by permission.

Discuss

1. Which of these reactions or emotional responses do we see in our ministry?
2. What's the best way to respond when children exhibit a number of these reactions or emotional responses?
3. What are the spiritual questions we've heard children of divorce ask?

Action Points

- Strive to be more aware of the emotional needs of children from divorced homes. Consider keeping notes of the various emotional responses. Look for patterns that indicate issues that may require special care or attention.
- Contact a child therapist in your church or community. Have them give a workshop on how to best help children of divorce with their emotional needs.
- Brainstorm answers to spiritual questions you've heard children of divorce ask.

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE



Faith Through the Lense of Divorce

Elizabeth Marquardt addresses spiritual issues related to children of divorce.

Isaiah 49:13–15

For her master's thesis in divinity school, Elizabeth Marquardt wrote a paper titled "The Moral and Spiritual Experiences of Children of Divorce." At the time, she found almost no data on the topic. So, in a project based at the Institute for American Values, she and Norval Glenn set out to learn more about adults whose parents had parted ways. The result was a four-year, nationally representative survey of 1,500 young adults between 18 and 35, members of the first generation to grow up with widespread divorce. Christianity Today spoke with Marquardt about her findings published in Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce.

How many children of divorce are there?

About a million American children each year experience their parents' divorce. Of 18- to 35-year-olds, which is the generation I studied, one-quarter are children of divorce.

What role does faith play in the lives of children of divorce?

They are much less religious overall than their peers who grew up with married parents. They are 14 percent less likely to be a member of a house of worship and also about 14 percent less likely to say that they are very or fairly religious. They're more likely to agree with the statement, *I believe I can find ultimate truths without help from a religion.*

Why is that?

In general, most churches aren't doing a good job at reaching out to children of divorce. Of those grown children of divorce who were active in a church at the time of their parents' divorce, two-thirds said that no one from the clergy or congregation reached out to them at that time. Only one-quarter said that someone did reach out to them.

Doesn't divorce bring out their need for God?

Yes, some of these adults turned to God and faith and the church as a home away from home, as a father they never had, in search of answers and truth they couldn't find in their families. I am leading workshops for clergy around the country on this topic.

How does divorce affect how the children of divorce read the Bible?

Let's take, for instance, the parable of the Prodigal Son. The children of divorce don't focus on the end of the story, when the child comes home and is welcomed by a loving parent. They focus on the beginning of the story, when someone leaves the family home. They think about the initial departure of their father or mother, which caused the divorce, or about the many comings and goings that occurred in their families throughout their childhoods because both of their parents worked. Young adults from divorced families say things like, *I was the one who was at home trying to keep the house together, trying to keep a family unit together.* One young woman told me, "When I hear the parable about the Prodigal Son, I always think maybe one of these days my dad will decide to come back, too."

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

The parable is supposed to illustrate God's love and compassion and presence. But children of divorce see themselves in the role of the father waiting for the child to come home. They have to be their own protector. They have to be the one waiting in the doorway for someone else to come home. It's a scary and anxiety-producing place for a child.

What harmful messages about divorce do you hear?

There are children's books that portray divorce as an adventure. There's one about how fun it is to stay with your dad in the city and ride on the subway and go to a museum, and then visit your mom in the country and ride a horse. It distorts and silences the children's loss and moral confusion. I find this happy talk about divorce to be incredibly callous—this idea that children are resilient, as if that justifies what we do to them. Even if children are resilient, this does nothing to change the burden they must overcome. Any kind of divorce, amicable or not, radically restructures children's childhoods and requires them to take on an entirely new job: to make sense of the parents' different sets of values and beliefs and ways of living. It's a hard job for all of us who are married. When you get divorced, the job doesn't go away. It just becomes the job of the child.

What does this restructuring of childhood do to children?

Nearly half [of the people in our study] said they had to be a different person with each of their parents. They were much more likely to say that they had to keep secrets after the divorce. All these percentages are two to three times higher than for people from intact families. Children of divorce feel like divided selves. They say: *I had to be a different person with each of my parents. I had a whole different life with each one. There's only a certain set of memories I talk to my dad about and only a certain set I talk to my mom about.*

Did you ask your respondents about the commandment to honor fathers and mothers?

Those with married parents generally said something like this: *The older I get, the more I realize what my parents did for me, as they get older, I'll take care of them.* For people from divorced families, the command immediately caused them to question what their parents did for them. If Dad abandoned the family and Mom heroically raised them on her own, they said, *I honor my mom. Given everything she did for me, how could I not?* But they got stuck on the issue of how to honor their father. Some said, *I just can't honor my parents. They weren't there for me.*

What about those with an active faith?

They said that the commandment called them to stay in relationship with their parents, when they might otherwise have abandoned it. It was both hopeful and sad. It was a sign of how weak their family relationships had become, but also how powerful a faith journey can be in helping you find a sense of wholeness even amidst these broken family relationships.

—adapted from an interview with ELIZABETH MARQUARDT by *Christianity Today*; © 2006 by the author or Christianity Today/*Christianity Today*. For more articles like this, visit www.christianitytoday.com.

Discuss

1. How do the children of divorce in our ministry view God and understand their relationship to him? If we don't know, how might we go about finding out?
2. How can we help children of divorce know that they are loved by God and by their church family?
3. How effective is our outreach to unchurched children whose parents are divorced? How could we more effectively reach these children and their families?

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE**Action Points**

- Review your Sunday school curriculum, looking at it through the eyes of children of divorce. How might these children view the Bible stories differently than children from intact homes? Does the curriculum assume children are from intact families? Discuss how you might need to modify your Bible lessons so that they more effectively ministry to children of divorce.
- Come up with a list of do's and don'ts when ministering to children of divorce and their parents. Put this list into a document. Review it periodically for any needed revisions. Use this document during team training sessions or discuss it with a teacher or small group leader who has a child of divorce in his or her class.

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE



A Program That Meets Their Needs

Ministering to children in crisis within your children's program.

Hebrews 6:18–20

Let's say you have several children of divorce in your ministry. Should you develop a specialized program so you can minister directly to them? Should you, for instance, offer a recovery group or small group for these children? Maybe. Or you could consider partnering with other churches in your area to offer a specialized ministry. However, in most situations, you can simply look for ways to minister right within your existing program. A few simple "tweaks" here and there in your current ministry could allow you to reach out effectively to kids from divorced homes. Here are a few ideas consider.

Establish Routine

As adults we often want to mix it up and try something new to avoid boredom. However, children find great comfort in knowing what's coming next and where they fit in week after week. This is especially true for children whose lives and routines have been disrupted by divorced or divorcing parents.

At church we can establish routines that allow children to know what to expect, which then frees them up to hear the Spirit's voice working in their hearts. For example, our worship program is the same every week. We welcome each other with song, hear a story from Scripture, and then children are invited to a time of response that ranges anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes. Here the children respond individually through art (such as drawing or using Play-Doh), reading their Bibles, or visiting our prayer corner. Children look forward to these regularly scheduled response times. These times can be especially beneficial for children struggling through painful circumstances, offering them a safe place to process their feelings.

Obviously, we want to be creative in our ministries and offer new experiences, but it is important that we do so within a routine that allows children to feel safe and secure.

Be Strategic About Verse Memorization

We all know that memorizing verses is important. However, we often rely on our curriculum to determine what verses our children learn. This is okay as a general rule, but sometimes it's helpful to choose verses based on the life experience of the children in your ministry. One creative way to do this is through a resource called "[Seeds Family Worship](#)." This innovative Bible memory program not only uses music kids genuinely enjoy, but teaches verses applicable to various issues kids face. In our church, children are learning—*as they sing*—to cast their cares on the Lord (Ps. 55:22) and that the Lord hears their cry (Ps. 40:1–2). They have also learned that they are important even if they are young (1 Tim. 4:12) and that when they are anxious, the peace of God will guard their hearts and minds (Phil. 4:6–7).

Think about it: Catchy tunes get stuck in your head, right? Now wed those catchy tunes with encouraging words of Scripture and you've found a way to bring comfort, hope, and healing to children who live in painful or difficult home environments. Whenever using music, remember that repetition is key and that you'll usually get tired of a song long before the kids do.

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Provide Mentoring Opportunities

A young boy named “Ben” (not his real name) is currently watching his parents separate. Mom and dad are still in the home, but are in separate bedrooms. Ben is a quiet child who takes things very seriously. One day he came to his mother and wisely expressed an interest in meeting with an adult during a midweek children’s program, instead of joining with the other kids. He began meeting with a man in the church, and together they are learning to play the guitar. This has given Ben the opportunity to process what is happening, to talk it out, when he feels ready.

Studies have shown that healthy relationships with adults other than their parents are incredibly meaningful to children. So, be open to creating mentoring opportunities within your ministry for children like Ben.

Allow Them to Minister to You

Viewing hurting children as “little ministers” can be tricky. But if done appropriately and sensitively, it can help children heal as they reach out to others in need. Let me give a very personal example. My husband and I are currently in the process of adoption and our wait has been long. Several months ago, I was overcome with emotion as I watched yet another adopted child being baptized at my church. Simply put, I sobbed. Several of the girls in our small group for fourth-through-sixth graders saw me and asked their leaders what had happened. The leaders encouraged me to talk to the girls about my reaction during the baptism service. I was happy to do so. The girls asked a lot of questions and we had a lovely conversation. At the time, these girls were learning to knit. And after our conversation, they decided to work together to make me a baby blanket. I had no idea what they were up to. And as they worked, they were praying. When I received that gift some months later, I found that I was ministered to by these girls more effectively than by many adults. I also realized that the whole experience had ministered to them. You see, in this very special group, I knew there were girls who had their own personal struggles: one who dealt with issues related to her own adoption, another who lived with the daily challenges of learning disabilities, and yet another who was watching her parents struggle to find work. As they spent several months praying for me, they also prayed for one another and shared openly about their own concerns. And they learned the joy that comes when we choose to care for one another. My point? While we need to take time to minister to the hurting children around us, we also need to allow those same children to minister to us.

One caveat: I shared openly with these girls, but not in great detail. We cannot go around broadcasting our own heartache expecting children to fix it. However, finding appropriate ways to share your own struggles can be extremely beneficial to children who are hurting. They can discover that they are not alone in their pain, and they can also find joy and healing through reaching out to others in need.

Give Them Hope

As children’s ministers, pastors, or youth pastors, we are called to bring the message of hope that is ours as Christians—that God has power over evil. That we are each a part of God’s beautiful, redemptive story. When we grieve, Christ grieves. Though pain and sorrow will come, God is faithful. This message can speak powerfully to children of divorce: *Though your parents are divorced, hope and healing can be found in Christ.*

Each week, our church tells this redemptive through our children’s worship program. One of the things I love about this program is that it allows children to hear the story of the gospel with no adaptations or additions, painful stories included. In their worship space, they are simply invited to meet God. I love it when hurting children realize their place in the redemptive story and find peace in the loving arms of their Good Shepherd.

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Those who work closely with children of divorce have found that these children are not looking for someone to make them feel better about their parents' divorce, but rather someone to give them hope in the midst of a terrible situation. Jesus Christ was called "man of sorrows" in scripture (Isaiah 53:2-4) and he offers hope to hurting children. As they struggle to understand what is happening around them, our job is simply to bring them to Jesus. And when we do, we can almost hear our Savior whispering, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

—AMY O'BRIEN is minister of Christian education at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Warrenton, Illinois; she earned a master's in Christian formation and ministry from Wheaton College Graduate School; she has worked with children in various capacities for more than 10 years.

Discuss

1. Which of the ideas in the article seem most doable in our church or ministry? What other ideas come to mind that aren't mentioned or that spin off of those offered?
2. How well are we currently sharing "God's beautiful, redemptive story" through our ministry? How could we more effectively offer the hope of Christ to hurting children?
3. When it comes to ministering more effectively to children of divorce, what resources from our church or community can we draw from? For instance, who in our congregation or in our community could help us set up a divorce recovery group for children?

Action Points

- Hold regular debriefing sessions with adults who minister to children of divorce. Whether their helping to run a support group or they simply have children from divorced homes in their Sunday school class, adult leaders need periodic times when they can discuss how to best minister, troubleshoot problems, gain insights from each other, and pray for one another.
- Provide training. In your cycle of volunteer training, include times when you provide mini-workshops on helping children of divorce. Bring in special speakers, gain insights from social workers in your congregation or community, explore solutions to specific issues your leaders are facing or may soon face.
- Use the [Telling the Whole Story](#) download from BuildingChurchLeaders.com. This resource will help you train your team to effectively share God's redemptive story with all children.

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE



Further Exploration

Books and other resources for effective ministry to children of divorce and their families.

- 📖 BuildingChurchLeaders.com: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today:
 - “[Divorce](#)” *Urgent Care*
 - “[Marriage in Crisis](#)” *Urgent Care*
 - “[Telling the Whole Story](#)” *Children's Ministry*

- 📖 ChristianBibleStudies.com: Adult Bible studies and teaching tools from Christianity Today :
 - “[Dealing with Divorce](#)” *Help for Children*
 - “[Divorce Recovery](#)” *Help for Children and Adults*

- 📖 [Divorce Ministry 4 Kids](#): Guidance for ministry and answers to key questions; offers a monthly free newsletter.

- 📖 [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids](#): Help for single parents, grandparents parenting the second generation, and anyone who interacts with children of divorce and their families.

- 📖 LeadershipJournal.net. This website owned by Christianity Today offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[Between Two Worlds](#) by *Elizabeth Marquardt*. With Professor Norval Glenn, Marquardt conducted a pioneering national study of children of divorce, surveying 1,500 young adults from both divorced and intact families between 2001 and 2003. She weaves the findings of that study together with powerful, unsentimental stories of the childhoods of young people from divorced families. The hard truth, she says, is that while divorce is sometimes necessary, even amicable divorces sow lasting inner conflict in the lives of children. (Three Rivers Press, 2006; ISBN: 978-0307237118)

[Children of Divorce](#) by *Andrew Root*. This book examines the impact of divorce from a practical theological perspective and also from a young person’s perspective. Those who have experienced divorce and those who work with or minister to young people whose parents are divorced will benefit from this book. (Baker Academic, 2010; ISBN: 978-0801039140)

[Little Lamb, Who Made Thee?](#) by *Walter Wangerin*. The stories, essays, and poems in this book portray children, teenagers, and parents as they grapple with deep realities of life. The author probes the relationships between children and their parents and what they have to show us about God and ourselves as his children. (Zondervan, 2004; ISBN: 978-0310248262)

[The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce](#) by *Judith Wallerstein*. In this landmark book based on a 25-year study, the author explores the profound impact divorce has on children as they reach adulthood and try to establish romantic relationships. (Hyperion, 2001; ISBN: 978-0786886166)