

Children From Divorced Families

What the Classroom Teacher Should Know and Can Do

Jon, usually an attentive and responsible 5th grader, has recently turned in incomplete, poorly done assignments and seems distracted and uneasy in class. He looks worried and has begun to ignore the other kids.

But when you ask what's bothering him, Jon looks down at his feet and mumbles, "Nothin'." When you try again a few days later, he bolts from the room. You find him in the rest room, tears streaming down his face. So you gently say, "Jon, when you feel like talking, I'll be here for you."

What could be the problem? you wonder. *He's smart, well liked by the other kids, and comes from a good home. No financial problems. Maybe one of his parents or siblings is sick, although I haven't heard anything at church. I wonder if there's a problem with drugs or his best friend has abandoned him. But that doesn't make sense. The other kids are trying to reach out to him.* Divorce never crosses your mind. After all, his father is the head elder of the largest church in the district, and his mother is very active in church and community affairs. Jon adores his father, and the family always seems happy and devoted to each other.

Another week goes by. Jon appears more miserable every day. You slip him a note, "Do you want to talk?" This time, Jon stays in at recess. With a prayer running through your head, you sit down beside him and gently touch his shoulder. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't think so, . . . but I've got to talk to someone," he says, followed by a long silence. *Why didn't I take that counseling course? What do I say now?* you wonder. And then the story comes out in bits and pieces. His father left home and is living with someone from his office. His mother cries all the time and won't answer his questions, so he doesn't really know what's happening, and she said not to tell anyone.

"But I had to talk to someone! You won't tell Mom I told you, will you? What can I do to get Dad to come back home?"

When their parents divorce, most children struggle with emotional issues that may follow them for years, sometimes into adulthood.

Jon has a long and difficult road ahead. His world is collapsing around him, and may never be the same again. You, as his teacher, may be the only adult in his life who can provide the stability he needs right now. His mom is overwhelmed by her own grief, so she has nothing to give Jon. His relatives and most church members will take sides. You can't afford to. Your responsibility is to be there for Jon.

What's ahead for Jon if his parents divorce? Many researchers have tried to answer this question, but the verdict is still out in some areas. The best-known longitudinal studies are led by Mavis Hetherington and Judith Wallerstein. Wallerstein has published findings from 10 years post-divorce and has data from 15 years follow-up. This article summarizes

the best thinking on the subject from a number of studies.

Potential Effects of Divorce on Children

When their parents divorce, most children struggle with emotional issues that may follow them for years, sometimes into adulthood. Not every child will experience all of these effects, but all will experience some of them. Use this list of potential effects to help each child deal with his or her problems, but be careful not to automatically label a child from a divorced family.

Almost every child of divorce experiences a pervasive sense of loss, accompanied by grief that may take many years to resolve. These children's views of a safe and reliable world have been shattered forever, and it may take them years to trust again.

Children often feel rejected by the parent who left and think they must have done something awful or the parent wouldn't have moved out. Even though adolescents understand cognitively that they didn't cause the rejection, they may still struggle to overcome these feelings.

Loneliness, especially if the family has to move to a new neighborhood or school, can be almost overwhelming for some children. The family's standard of living often goes down sharply,

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as the mother—who usually has custody—often lacks the earning power of the absent father. Instead of leisurely afternoons, weekends with friends, and involvement with sports, an adolescent may have to care for younger siblings and do a major portion of the housework. He or she often feels cut off from friends and from the missing parent.

Anxiety can easily overwhelm such children. The future, once filled with promise, appears uncertain and hopeless. Anger—usually targeted at the parents—can also take over. An angry, anxious child or teenager courts trouble.

Children from divorced families almost always experience conflicted loyalties. They love both of their parents, and yet each parent blames the other for the family break-up. Ugly scenes leading up to the separation and later over visitation or custody place the child squarely in the middle. Many children feel they must be peacemakers and messengers between their parents.

Although adolescents from divorced fami-

lies tend to be promiscuous, they generally have difficulties with close personal relationships. College-age students with divorced parents often express concern about their ability to sustain a loving marital relationship, and may pull back from potential partners.

Divorce may also affect children's physical and mental health, and school performance. According to the findings of the 1988 U.S. National Health Interview Survey on Child Health (17,110 interviews with a nationally representative sample of civilian, noninstitutionalized population), children are adversely affected by divorce and single parenting. This group had greater overall health vulnerability scores, including higher risk for asthma, headaches, and injuries. They were more likely to repeat a grade or be expelled or suspended from school. They had higher rates of problem behavior, including greater risk for antisocial behavior, peer conflict and social withdrawal, and dependency.

The children at greatest risk are those caught in the middle of a high-conflict divorce. For them, the turmoil never seems to end. They especially need the protection, support, and help that schools can give.

Adjustment Tasks of Divorce

During the first several years, these children's major emotional task is to **acknowledge the reality of the divorce**. This is not easy. Children want to reunite their family and will go to great lengths to try to make this happen, including getting sick (e.g., a major asthma attack) or injured or getting into trouble at school, in the hope that their parents will unite to help them. The divorce may consume their thoughts and make it difficult for them to concentrate on school work. On the other hand,

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some children may experience school as a “good” place where they can forget about their problems for a while, and their academic performance may hold up well. Either way, children must acknowledge that the divorce really happened and their parents probably are not going to get back together again.

After acknowledging the reality of the divorce, children need to **disengage from their parents’ conflicts and resume their own lives**. While this is often easier for teenagers than for younger children, all ages need to move on. In high-conflict divorces, the turmoil never

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ceases.

Whatever teachers can do to help children get involved in their own activities and friendships will help in the long run.

The remaining four adjustment tasks of divorce may take many years. Each child will follow his or her own timetable in resolving these issues.

Loss. The divorce of one’s parents brings great losses, which may surface years down the line, when the problems seemed to have been resolved. An attractive, competent college senior named Kristen* explained it this way, “My parents divorced when I was about 18 months old. I never knew my father, and I thought my mother and I had a wonderful relationship. Divorce hadn’t affected me, I thought. But lately, I’ve been really troubled. I’m angry at my parents for robbing me of the childhood I should have had.” She was experiencing a “sleeper effect” of parental divorce—more than 20 years after the event.

Anger and self-blame. Anger often combines with the sense of loss, as it did for Kristen. She was mature enough not to blame herself for the divorce, but that didn’t keep her from feeling angry. Ultimately, adolescents and

*Not her real name.

young adults need to learn to forgive their parents and leave their self-blame with God—the only permanent resolution.

Permanence of divorce.

Acknowledging that the divorce has occurred is one thing, but accepting its permanence is quite another. I know many adults who are still trying, in some way, to get their parents back together again. They haven’t been able to resolve their sense of loss and anger. Our best support, as teachers, is to listen, offer encouragement, and never blame.

Realistic hope for relationships.

Kristen went on to say, “I’m engaged to be married soon, but I’m feeling uneasy. Can I achieve a successful marriage? Or am I doomed to divorce, also?”

Is my anger toward my parents a warning sign that I’m not ready to marry yet?” Achieving a realistic hope for future marital relationships is the last adjustment task of divorce. It requires successful passage through the previous adjustment tasks. Some people never reach this level—they go from one live-in partner or sexual encounter to another, never finding what they need for a permanent relationship. Others manage to become successful marriage partners and parents.

The adjustment tasks can recur at each new stage of development, but with a different perspective. The 12- or 13-year-old may suddenly conclude that his parents’ divorce was biblically wrong and they won’t be saved. What do you say, as his Bible teacher, when he offers this new insight? You remember that the couple’s affairs were well-known in church circles before their divorce. Think now about your response, for you will surely need wisdom from God for such crucial moments.

The potential effects of divorce also differ according to the child’s developmental stage. The sidebars accompanying this article summarize the problems that may occur at different ages.

Although the effects of divorce sound grim, many children come through a family break-up

relatively well, even though they may experience some of these effects at each age. Some children are more resilient than others. Often, these children have received greater adult support at crucial times. That's where teachers come in.

How to Help

No one expects teachers to solve all the problems of a child from a divorcing family. They are not trained counselors and cannot spend all of their time on one child's problems.

But, without disrupting the regular classroom routines, they can do much to help such children deal with their lives. In fact, maintaining a predictable classroom atmosphere can be reassuring to children whose lives are in chaos.

The following ideas will get you started. God will give you wisdom for the situations that demand more than human ability.

Examine Your Own Feelings First

Do not be judgmental about the divorce.

Children often feel rejected by the parent who left and think they must have done something awful or the parent wouldn't have left.

POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN BY AGES

EARLY CHILDHOOD

- Fear of abandonment by custodial parent—who will take care of me?
- Regression to earlier developmental stage.
- Nightmares—wanting to sleep with adult.
- Changes in behavior at home and in day care or school—aggressive, restless, noisy, irritable, clinging, possessive of adults, disrupted play, withdrawn.
- Feeling guilty or blaming self for divorce.
- Concern about not being loved or being unlovable.
- Denial of the reality of divorce.
- Inability to trust adults or other children.
- Difficulty developing appropriate sex role.
- Feelings of inadequacy due to reversal of roles, as child is used by parent to help handle his or her pain.

LATE CHILDHOOD

Early Elementary

- Sadness and loneliness.
- Concern about material goods and nurturing (e.g., compulsive overeating out of fear).
- Feeling guilty or blaming self for divorce.
- Poor academic achievement.
- Negative attitudes toward authority figures.
- Anxiety, restlessness, inability to concentrate, intrusive thoughts about the divorce.

- Seeking someone to blame—often the custodial parent.

Later Elementary

- Increased ability to understand the dynamics of parents' marital relationship.
- Moral outrage or shame and embarrassment about divorce.
- Intense anger toward both parents.
- Lying and petty stealing.
- Isolation, loneliness, and lack of self-esteem because of inability to share distress with peers.

ADOLESCENCE

- Loss of self-identity because of preoccupation with divorce.
- Need for affection and reassurance about own gender role, leading to premature sexual activity.
- Antisocial or delinquent behavior.
- Intense anger, general upset, sadness.
- Negative feelings toward parents, rejection of them as role models.
- Concern about personal competence as a marital partner.
- Premature independence, which may lead to loss of impulse control and substance abuse.
- Severe anxiety about own ability to be a sexually competent marital partner.
- Delayed separation from family, resulting in prolonged or disrupted entry into adulthood.
- Difficulty dealing with romance or sexuality of parent.

Avoid gossip. Pray for a forgiving spirit. You must be solidly on the child's side, which means that you should probably not take either parent's side.

If pain from the breakup of your own family in childhood, or adulthood, returns to haunt you, pray through these feelings. If they become overwhelming, talk with a close friend or Christian counselor. It is quite normal for these feelings to emerge, but it will be difficult for you to help a hurting child if you are drowning in your own despair.

Make the School a Stable and Loving Environment

1. Make the school a stabilizing environment for the child whose home life is chaotic and uncertain. Follow routines. Be predictable.
2. Provide consistent, firm, and loving discipline. Having rules to follow and someone who cares at school helps provide a secure environment when discipline at home may be erratic.
3. Encourage the child to join in activities, discussions, and projects. Assign him or her to cooperative learning groups with other children who are empathetic or have been through the same kinds of experiences.
4. Make school a safe, happy place.
5. Don't try to force the child into an adult role. Never say, "Now you'll be the man of the family. You must take care of your mother and sister." That is a burden no child or teenager can successfully carry. Children need to know there are adults who will take care of them. The parent may be so involved in his or her own feelings that the child feels neglected.

Help Children Deal With Their Feelings

1. Repeatedly reassure the child that he or she is NOT to blame for the divorce.
2. Explain that it is all right to love both parents, including step-parents and biological parents, present or absent. Children sometimes feel

Divorce may also affect children's physical and mental health, and school performance.

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guilty because they want to love the absent parent or a step-parent, but the biological parent doesn't approve.

3. Encourage children to express their feelings through art, music, drama, writing, or journaling. Some children may want to carry on a journaling dialogue with you about their feelings.

4. Observe carefully and be a good listener. Notice body language and general deportment. You cannot solve the child's home problems, but you can be someone who cares. The child's parents are likely to be very self-centered while in the turmoil of family breakup.

5. Be a good secret keeper. You will totally destroy the child if you reveal confidences.

6. Answer students' questions about divorce as carefully as possible. Pray often for divine guidance.

7. If the student's behavior is deteriorating sharply, encourage the resident parent to get help from a Christian counselor. Sometimes the

emotional needs of children get overlooked in the turmoil of the adults' problems.

Provide Acceptance and Spiritual Help

Maintain an optimistic view of the child's future. Provide a warm, caring atmosphere. Do not overgeneralize the potential effects of divorce. Do not project a "holier-than-thou" attitude. In some churches, a divorcing or divorced family is shunned. God's way is loving concern.

Pray with children about their concerns. Help them find some key Bible promises to claim. Reassure older children and teenagers that, even if their parents have made mistakes, God is always willing to forgive and help them get a new start. No problem is too great for God.

Consider the Needs

of the Entire Class

1. Include the "problem" of the child whose family has divorced as reading, writing, and discussion assignments for all students.

2. Teach problem-solving skills.

3. Reassure the class that arguments do not mean their parents will divorce. Many children fear a marital break-up when their friends' families have divorced.

4. If you think the child's classmates need an explanation about the pending divorce, you might say that sometimes adults who once loved each other do not get along anymore and divorce. That does not mean they do not love their children. Jon's family is having some trouble right now, but his parents still love him. We can help Jon by praying for his family.

Practical and Legal Issues

1. Determine who receives copies of school notices, who can pick up the child at school, who attends parent conferences (joint, separate, one only), who receives a copy of the report card, who is responsible for medical decisions, who is to be called in emergencies, and

who the child lives with (and when, in case of joint custody). If necessary, ask to see a copy of the custody arrangement and keep on file instructions for all of the above items. If a custodial parent becomes hostile, ask to see legal documentation that the other parent has no legal right to the child. If you let a child leave school with a parent who has no legal right to him or her, you have assisted in a "kidnapping." Make sure all school employees are aware of these instructions.

2. Many issues lack clear legal guidelines. Some parents get very demanding and take out their frustrations on the school. Even the experts vary on how much effort the school should make to contact noncustodial parents. Your school should obtain legal counsel to deal with these issues. In the meantime, use common sense and consult your principal or superintendent for advice.

3. When assigning homework, consider the child's living arrangements. Have students begin homework in class, and help them get organized. Be sure needed study materials are available wherever the child stays. If the child moves frequently between homes, suggest that the parents purchase an extra set of textbooks and keep one at each home.

4. Be considerate of the child's needs. When staying with one parent, the child may have no privacy or quiet spot for studying. Be flexible about due dates, but do not allow the child to use the divorce as an excuse for not turning in assignments. Children need the sense of pride that comes from doing their work well and on time, if at all possible.

While the divorce rate in the United States has leveled off in the past few years, more than one-third of children born in the past decade will not live with both parents sometime before they are grown. Although most children of divorce will live with their mothers, joint custody is increasing and more fathers are pressing for their rights.

As teachers, we cannot avoid the issues related to divorce. They stare us in the face every day. They concern our students. It is our Christian duty to support the children and adolescents in our classrooms. We can make a difference, one child at a time. ☺

Recently retired, Dr. Donna J. Habenicht was a Professor of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the Andrews University School of Education in Berrien Springs, Michigan at the time this article was written. A licensed psychologist, she specializes in working with children.