

JESUS

SOMEONE WHO CARES

Mentor's Guide for Children of Divorce



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Introduction:

Currently, statistics indicate that approximately 50% of first marriages and 60% of remarriages in the U.S. end in divorce.¹ Research conducted by the Barna Group states “born again Christians have the same likelihood of divorce as do non-Christians.”² It is estimated that one million children in America are involved in a new divorce each year.³

Dr. Lee Salk, a child psychologist, stated: “The trauma of divorce is second only to death. Children sense a deep loss and feel they are suddenly vulnerable to forces beyond their control.”⁴ Divorce is a life-altering crisis that has a dramatic effect on children’s lives, relations, attitudes, behaviors, and future life choices for years to come. A divorce may very well be the most stressful event a child will ever face in his entire life.⁵

Children also experience several additional losses during and following a divorce. Fractured family structure, separation from one of the parents, financial instability, parental work schedules, moving to a new home, moving away from neighborhood friends, new school, and step-parents/step-siblings are just a few of the possible changes (losses) a child may face. The child’s sense of loss is ongoing and may increase, especially around holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions when the family is normally together.⁶

The divorce and subsequent losses rob a child’s sense of security and control. The stress caused by these multiple losses hinders their ability to process the event and leaves them feeling overwhelmed, unprotected and powerless.

During this difficult time, children look to their parents for security and comfort. Unfortunately, the parents may be physically or emotionally unavailable to provide comfort and care. The parents are often preoccupied with their own emotions and needs and don’t have the time, strength, or ability to help their children process the divorce.

This is why your role is so important. These children need someone to care, someone who will listen, and someone who will walk with them toward healing and hope. You are that person. You may wonder if you are qualified or able to mentor children. Be assured that this manual will give you helpful information and very clear instructions for you to use as you meet with the children. Thank you for committing to make a difference in the lives of hurting children.

“Jesus, Someone Who Cares” Children of Divorce Mentor’s Guide:

Please be sure to read “*A Guide for Mentors*” before meeting with a child. It provides helpful information and resources for talking with children about traumatic events.

The mentor’s guide for children of divorce is a supplement to the “Jesus, Someone Who Cares” book. This guide will provide you with discussion questions and resources specifically for children of divorce. As you read the “Jesus, Someone Who Cares” book with the children, this guide will help you apply specific content of the story to their area of emotional hurt.

Common Reactions of Children to a Divorce:

A child’s reaction to a divorce depends on several variables: the child’s age and temperament, pre-divorce tension and/or hostility in the home, the presence of additional trauma (i.e. abuse, domestic violence, etc.), and the parent’s ability to focus on the feelings and needs of the child in the midst of their own anger, loss, and discomfort.⁷ A common rule is the greater the hostility, the greater the damage.⁸ The following are common reactions to divorce, by age group^{9 10 11}:

Toddlers (*two to four years of age*):

- Separation anxiety – difficulty separating from parents
- Regress to an earlier stage of development (i.e., thumb sucking)
- Loss of skills they may have developed (i.e., toilet training)
- Become more dependent and passive, engage in babyish behavior
- Sleeping and naptime routines may change
- Older toddlers may have nightmares
- May express anger toward a parent

Young Children (*five to eight years of age*):

- May show regressive behaviors
- Tend to take responsibility for the divorce or separation
- Irrational fears of being abandoned and not having physical needs met
- Complain of frequent headaches, stomach aches, tightness in chest, etc.
- Loss of sleep
- Bedwetting
- Deep sense of sadness and grieving because of the absence of one parent
- Nightmares
- Aggressive and angry toward the parent they blame for the divorce
- Retreat into fantasy as a means of solving the family crisis (they may have rich fantasies about parents getting back together)

Older Children (*nine to twelve years of age*):

- Anger becomes the dominant emotion
- Anger directed at the parent believed to be the initiator
- May feel abandoned by the parent who moves out of the house
- May be moody or preoccupied
- Complain of headaches, stomach aches, tightness in chest, etc.
- Withdraw from long-time friends and favorite activities/hobbies
- May act out in uncharacteristic ways (i.e., using bad language, aggressive behavior, rebellious)
- School performance may decrease
- Agonize about their divided loyalties
- May feel unsure about their own beliefs concerning love, marriage and family
- Begin to worry about adult matters (i.e., finances)
- Spiritual development is most likely to be damaged at this age – disappointment, disillusionment, and rejection of parents' spiritual values could occur
- Feel obligated to take on more adult responsibilities in the family – a sense of growing up too soon

Since children may not know why the divorce happened, they will have a tendency to make up their own reasons. Their reasons may not be based on truth, but rather on their imagination. Young children, especially, may feel that they somehow caused the divorce to happen which will lead to feelings of guilt. For example, if a child was misbehaving just prior to hearing the news of the divorce or a big “blowout” between the parents, he may feel that this bad thing happened because he was acting badly.

These reactions should be considered normal responses and children should not be shamed or punished for demonstrating these normal behaviors. Rather, they need to know that it is okay to feel the way they do and that you would like to talk with them about their feelings.

They also need to know that they won't always feel this way. Overtime, they will feel better as they play, draw, or talk about their feelings and experiences with you and their parents.

Emotional Stages of Grief/Loss:

The way a child feels concerning the divorce will change as time passes. During a crisis, such as a divorce, children move through a series of clearly identifiable stages. These stages are considered normal and necessary. It is not healthy for a child to bypass any of these stages. The goal is for the child to pass through each stage in order to produce positive growth and minimize the negative effects. As a caregiver and friend, allow the child to experience each of these stages and be available to listen, empathize, and pray with them. *Note: This information is given so that you can know what a child is experiencing. The parent or caregiver will be responsible to help the child pass through these stages. You may consider giving this portion of the guide to them so that they can know what to expect and how to help their child.*

Stage One: Fear and Anxiety. No matter how open or hidden the conflict between parents, the news of divorce or separation is nearly always a shock to a child. Divorce shakes the foundation of a child's sense of security and stability. Therefore, the first emotional reaction is one of panic, fear and anxiety. Symptoms of this stage include sweating, restlessness, sleeplessness, nightmares, hyperventilation, tightness in the chest, gastrointestinal disturbances and a variety of aches and pains. During this stage, the child needs to know that their security and stability is a primary focus. They also need to be kept informed of the facts and plans. A child is better off hearing the truth than creating or imagining something far worse than the truth. Take the child's developmental stage into consideration when deciding how much information to share and how to share it.

Stage Two: Abandonment and Rejection. The child of divorce often feels abandoned and rejected by the parent who leaves the home. Young children tend to have these feelings more than older ones. They cannot always distinguish between the parents' separation from each other and one of the parent's separating from them. Feelings of rejection are increased when the parent who is leaving already has a relationship with another person who has children of their own. The feelings of abandonment and rejection can be significantly reduced if the departing parent continues to have regular contact during the early stages of separation and divorce. Since this time is usually wrought with tension between the parents, great effort should be made on the part of both parents to call a truce for the sake of the child and provide adequate time for the departing parent and child to be together.

Stage Three: Aloneness and Sadness. With normal family activities (i.e., eating together, normal daily routines, etc.) drastically diminished, the child finds that he has more alone time than ever before. The conflict that normally filled the home atmosphere is also gone leaving a void and an overall feeling of loneliness. Having all this additional alone time on his hands, the child begins to think about what has happened and for the first time a deep sadness sets in. The child may complain of having stomachaches and a tightness in his chest. Soon hobbies and activities the child enjoys are neglected. The child loses his appetite making eating difficult. His energy is diminished, lacks motivation, and generally mopes around. Depression has set in. Crying spells begin and may grow stronger. At this stage, it is important to allow the child to cry and avoid shaming or embarrassing him for doing so. Crying is a normal part of the healing process.

Stage Four: Frustration and Anger. The child of divorce desperately wants security and happiness. He wants things to return to the way they were before the divorce. Since they can't get what they want, their needs are blocked and neglected. This leaves the child feeling frustrated; that frustration leads to anger. Frustration and anger have a unique relationship.

When we feel frustrated, the accompanying anger motivates us to overcome the obstacle or hindrance that causes the frustration. In divorce, the child has many goals and desires blocked. Therefore, it is natural for him to feel angry. However, since all of the decisions are being made by the parents, his anger is powerless to change anything. At this point, his anger often turns inward and he may do something to hurt himself. During this stage, the child needs to know that it is okay to feel angry, it is a normal reaction. What he does with his anger, however, needs to be channeled in appropriate ways. It is not helpful to react to the child's anger with anger. Rather, tell the child that you understand he is angry and encourage him to talk about his feelings.

Stage Five: Rejection and Resentment. During this stage, the child pulls away and places some emotional distance between himself and the parent. The silent treatment, pouting, not responding when called or spoken to, and becoming overly critical and condemning of others are common expressions of this stage. The child's purpose is two-fold, it provides protection from further emotional pain, and it is a way of punishing the parent for what has happened. A child of divorce may exhibit actions or behaviors that are the exact opposite of what he feels. He pushes his parents away when he really wants to be held, or says hateful things when he wants his parents to be loving. This is his way of protecting himself from being rejected. The parent needs to see this behavior for what it is: a desperate attempt to gain love. It is important in this stage to remember that the child doesn't always mean what they say, and they often say the opposite of what they mean.

Stage Six: The Reestablishment of Trust. This is the final and most freeing stage. The child begins to accept the reality of this new life and can look to the future with hope. How long does it take for a child to get to this stage? The answer to this question varies from situation to situation. Several factors are involved. The recovery time depends on the level of marital conflict, age of the child, level of interaction with both parents, amount of attention the child received, and how the parents have related to each other. It could take a few months to a few years – in some cases, many years.¹²

Guiding Children of Divorce through the “Jesus, Someone Who Cares” Book:

During troubling times, it is comforting to know that there is someone available who cares about us and desires to walk with us through our difficult moments. You will be one of those caring people the child needs. However, even the most caring, available mentor will not be able to be with each child every minute of each day. That is why it is important for you to introduce the child to Jesus and help them discover that Jesus cares about them and is available, any time, to help them through their struggles in life. Jesus has promised to be with us always. That is the most important truth the child needs to understand through this book – Jesus is someone who cares!

Amber's story, which begins on page 15, will be the story that most relates to the child's experience during a divorce. Other stories, like Beni's story about his problem with anger (pages 13-14), will also be useful. The overall presentation of the life of Christ in this book will also provide additional discussions that may be helpful in bringing comfort and hope to the child reader.

The following questions can be used to create discussion with the child about the divorce, his feelings, thoughts and reactions. The child may have never told anyone his story. These questions will cause him to think about the divorce or separation which may lead to strong emotional reactions. The section titled “Emotional Reactions and Suggested Intervention” in the “Guide for Mentor's” will help you to deal with some possible emotional reactions. If a child

does not want to answer a question or talk about what happened, don't force her to talk. Perhaps she would be more comfortable drawing a picture of her answer or feelings.

The discussion questions below are just suggestions. You do not need to use all of them. You will probably not get through all of these questions in one meeting. The child may need a break or lose interest in the questions. Watch for signs that show the child is no longer interested (child changes the subject, begins to misbehave, acts bored or states boredom, etc.)

After you go through the story and the following discussion questions, talk with the child about the very last page titled "How About You?" The greatest help and hope you can give a child is a relationship with Jesus.

Discussion Questions from Amber's Story (pages 15-16):

1. Amber said that she felt rejected by her father. What do you think made her feel that way?
2. In what ways did Amber's father hurt her feelings?
3. Did Amber deserve what her father was doing? Why or why not?
4. In what ways have you felt like Amber? (*Note: assure the child that his feelings are normal responses to divorce.*)
5. Amber said that her parents fought constantly. How do you think it made Amber feel to hear her parents fighting?
6. If you were with Amber when her parents were fighting, what would you say to her?
7. What would you want to say to Amber's parents?
8. What would Amber want to say to her parents?
9. Do you think it was Amber's fault that her parents fought? Why or why not?
10. Amber's father left her and her mother. He said some very hurtful things. Why do you think he said those things?
11. Amber felt that it was her fault her father left. Why do you think Amber felt that way?
12. Do you think it was Amber's fault her father left? Why or why not?
13. Amber was having a very hard time with all of that was happening. How is your story similar to Amber's? How is it different?
14. What would you say to Amber to help her feel better?
15. What happened when your parents divorced? What did you see? Hear?
16. What were your thoughts and feelings when you found out about the divorce?
17. What do you think about today? How do you feel about it today?
18. What did people tell you that helped you feel better?
19. What did you do to help yourself feel better after the news of the divorce?
20. What are you doing now to help yourself?
21. In the Bible story Amber told, Jesus accepted the woman even though everyone else thought she was guilty. Have you ever felt Jesus would not accept you? Why or why not?
22. How does it make you feel to know that Jesus loves and accepts you no matter what?

23. Jesus cares about you and wants to help you during this difficult time. In what ways would you like Jesus to help you?
24. How do you ask Jesus to help?
25. What would you want to say to Jesus today? What would Jesus want to say to you?

Closing the Discussion:

It is important that you end the discussion with encouragement and hope. Spend some time talking about the good things that are happening in their lives. Talk about ways that Jesus can help them. You want to leave them with hope, not hurt.

It is best to end your discussion time with prayer. Ask the child if there is anything you can pray with her about. In your prayer, include a prayer of comfort for the child, the assurance that Jesus loves her and will always be with her (in good times and bad), and that she can always trust in Him. If the child would like to receive Christ as her Lord and Savior, lead her in a prayer of salvation.

Tell her that you appreciate her sharing her story and feelings. Let her know that you will continue to pray for her and her family. Tell her that you are available if she needs to talk or would like prayer.

Additional Resources:

Dr. Archibald D. Hart, *Helping Children Survive Divorce* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996)

David L. Sibley and Linda Kondracki Sibley, *Confident Kids Support Groups*,
www.confidentkids.com

Gary Sprague, *KIDS HOPE*, www.kidshope.org

H. Norman Wright, *Crisis Counseling* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993)

¹ *Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2003*, National Vital Statistics Reports, June 10, 2004.

² *Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians*, The Barna Group, September 8, 2004.

³ *Divorce Statistics*, www.divorcemagazine.com/statistics/statsUS.shtml, 2003.

⁴ Dr. Archibald D. Hart, *Helping Children Survive Divorce* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996), page 19.

⁵ *Divorce – A Medical Emergency*, <http://childrenanddivorce.bizland.com/rfc/id10.html>, adapted.

⁶ George J. Cohen, MD, *Helping Children and Families Deal with Divorce and Separation* (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002), Pediatrics Vol. 110 No.6 page 1019, adapted.

⁷ Ibid, adapted.

⁸ Hart, *Helping Children Survive Divorce*, pg. 24.

⁹ Cohen, *Helping Children and Families Deal with Divorce and Separation*, pgs. 1019-1020, adapted.

¹⁰ Hart, *Helping Children Survive Divorce*, pgs. 20-22, adapted.

¹¹ Kim Leon and Kelly Cole, *Helping Children Understand Divorce* (Published by MU Extension, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2004), pgs. 2-3.

¹² Hart, *Helping Children Survive Divorce*, pgs. 67-75, adapted.

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