

No good divorce: The children's perspective

Feature in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

In her book [*Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*](#), Elizabeth Marquardt examines the impact of divorce on children. Her book is based on a survey of 1,500 young adults which allowed her to compare the experiences of children of divorced parents with the experiences of children of married parents. Marquardt, a graduate of the University of Chicago Divinity School and a researcher with the Institute for American Values, calls the study the most comprehensive ever undertaken on the subject. We talked to her about her findings and about the impact of divorce on children's moral and spiritual lives.

The title of your book suggests one of its major themes: that in divorce a child is caught between two worlds. Why did you choose this metaphor and why is it so important a theme?

One of the big challenges for any marriage is to bring together two worlds—two people with different backgrounds and often different values. The rubbing together of these two worlds is often not neat or pretty, but some kind of unity is established.

After a divorce, the job of making sense of the two worlds and the conflicts that arise between them doesn't go away—it gets handed from the adults to the child. The child has to negotiate by himself or herself the different beliefs and values and ways of living that the child finds in each world. And these two worlds often become more different as each year goes by and the divorced parents develop new relationships, new jobs, new interests.

You refer to children of divorce as “early moral forgers.” What do you mean by that?

Children who grow up traveling between two worlds feel early on the need to confront—alone—the big moral questions: What's right and wrong? What do I believe? Where do I belong? Is there a God? What is true? They feel the need to

confront these questions because they see dramatically contrasting answers in each parent's world. In fact, they're much more likely to see their parents as polar opposites even when they don't fight. Any answer they glean from one world can be undermined by looking at the other.

Many people have noticed that children of divorce often seem independent. They tend to help around the house or travel between parents' homes alone or take care of their younger siblings by themselves. They also have to become independent moral thinkers. Some people might say: Well, this need to be independent is a good thing. But while some children certainly can rise to the occasion, they lose their childhoods, and I think that that's something that we should mourn, not celebrate.

And some children cannot rise to the task. This helps explain why children of divorce are two to three times more likely than other children to end up with very serious social and emotional problems. The ones who cannot handle the difficulty of making sense of two worlds might be the ones who numb their pain with addictions or early sexual activity, or who suffer from depression.

How has your own experience as a child of divorce shaped your investigation?

I'm now 35. My parents split up when I was two years old. When I was in divinity school in the mid-1990s I went looking for resources on the moral and spiritual impact of divorce on children. I found there were none. That was remarkable, given that the divorce rate had been quite high for quite some time. It seemed to me, as a child of divorce who was struggling with questions of faith, that there is a huge connection between one's family experience and one's approach to questions of faith, including the images and stories of the Christian faith.

A lot of the questions we asked in the national survey were ones that came from my experience. They were questions no one had asked these young people before—questions like: Did you feel like a different person with each of your parents? Did you see your parents as polar opposites? Did God become the father you never had in real life?

The survey results have given me the confidence to claim to speak for a generation that for the first time is telling the story of divorce from its own point of view. Until now the discussion has been conducted as if divorce is only about and for the parents.

What is the impact of divorce on children's religious lives?

We discovered that children of divorce are far less likely when they grow up to say they are very or even fairly religious. They're far less likely to attend a house of worship frequently. There is about a 14 percent difference in this area between children of divorce and children of intact families. They're also less likely to be a member of a house of worship or to be a leader there.

Partly this is because the children are less likely to have been involved in a community of faith as a child. Divorce itself makes it difficult logistically for parents to stay connected to any kind of community.

But there are deeper issues. For example, when children of divorce hear that God is like a father or a parent because God's always there for you, they experience a disconnect. For them, parental absence is as common an experience as parental presence.

It's remarkable to talk to the children of divorce about the parable of the prodigal son, in which the father waits for his errant son to come home. They recognize the act of leaving home, but in their experience it was the parent who left, not the child. It was the parent who left the family, or who was always leaving to go to work or out on dates. If anyone was staying home waiting for someone to return, it was the child waiting for mom and dad to come home.

The parable is about the patient love of God. This means that children of divorce see themselves in the role of God in the story. What a scary, strange feeling that is for such children—especially if no one around them in the community of faith understands how they're seeing it. These kinds of disconnects are what keep the children of divorce as they grow up more distant from church.

Yet the findings overall are somewhat complicated. Though generally the grown-up children of divorce are substantially less religious than those from intact families, a portion of them become much more religious. And I have heard anecdotally of many children of divorce who seek out the church because they're looking for the meaning and stability they find there.

What would you say to pastors about ministering to children of divorce?

First, questions of truth and of belonging are central in the minds of these children. Even as young teenagers, even as preteens, they're attuned in many ways to paradox, to suffering, to the deep questions of faith

I think the story of the exile is really powerful for children of divorce. Exile describes for them their sense of being fragmented inside, of feeling like divided selves, torn between two worlds. They feel like they have multiple places to call home, none of which really feels like home.

In the Christian tradition, exile is not the end of the story. Those in exile can come home to God and find healing and wholeness in God's presence. Preach a good sermon on that theme and I guarantee that people will be touched.

Do you think a more realistic understanding of the impact of divorce on children would have a measurable effect on divorce rates?

I don't think it would slash it in half or anything like that. But I do think we would see some correction in the divorce rate.

I think this understanding would encourage people to save marriages that could very well be saved without undo pain on the part of the adults. I'm thinking of marriages that are ending because of boredom or because of a desire for a new partner or not being sure you really love your partner, or because you feel that you've grown apart. Those issues are troubling to adults, but they are not that apparent to kids.

That's where the "good divorce" language can be so damaging. It makes parents think that divorce won't be a big deal so long as they do it right. There's such a thing as necessary divorce, but there's not such a thing as a good divorce.

Isn't it important that a divorcing couple gets along amicably after divorce and that each parent stays involved in the child's life?

Obviously it's better for a divorced couple to get along and be involved in the child's life. But from a child's perspective, the fact that the divorced parents are getting along reasonably well and are staying involved makes the divorce in a sense more inexplicable. The child still feels the weight of a big burden—to make sense of two very different worlds—and if the burden feels overwhelming, the child feels that she has only herself to blame. That's the moral drama that no one has ever talked about, and it's a drama that faces children even when their divorced parents don't

fight a lot—and most of them don't.

What qualifies as a “necessary” divorce?

There are high-conflict marriages characterized by abuse, violence, or serious and frequent quarreling in which divorce is a vital option. What most people don't know is that two-thirds of divorces end low-conflict marriages.

Does the ending in divorce of many low-conflict marriages suggest that people have inappropriate expectations of marriage?

There is an interesting historical background to this issue. When the divorce revolution took off with the advent of no-fault divorce in the 1960s, experts predicted that marriages overall would be happier because all the unhappy people would get divorced. Studies have shown, however, that as the divorce rate grew, the marital happiness rate fell. As marriage became easier to get out of, the threshold of what constituted a problematic marriage was lowered.

At one time, society made it too hard to get out of a horrendous marriage. But we have gone too far in the other direction. We have adopted a trickle-down notion of happiness: if the parents are happy, then the children will be happy. By that reasoning, if the parents need a divorce to be happy, that's fine, because everybody will be happier if the parents are happy.

That idea has no bearing on children's experience. Children's happiness is not simply a product of adult happiness. Frankly, if theirs is not a high-conflict household, children in many ways aren't all that concerned if their parents are happy.

Some people, including pastors and other church people, may be reluctant to raise the issue of children's experience of divorce because they don't want to add to the guilt or shame felt by divorced parents.

I know that people are sensitive about this issue. But even if we were to grant that every single divorce in this country is necessary, it would still be important to study the experience of children—just as we study the experience of heart patients after surgery. We don't say, “Well, the surgery was necessary, so whatever happens afterward is irrelevant.”

Too often the debate on children of divorce gets turned into a debate on whether parents should be getting divorced in the first place. That move silences the experience of kids.

I imagined the first audience for my book being the grown children of divorce; it's aimed at helping them understand and articulate their experience. The second audience I imagined is married parents who may have considered divorce. I want to help them understand not just what divorce does to a child, but what marriage does for a child. And finally, for divorced parents I think this book illuminates the inner experience of their child in ways they may not have considered. If they can better understand their child's inner world, they can help their child feel less isolated.