Children of Divorce

Ten-year-old Marianna lives with Mom Tuesdays through Thursdays and every other weekend, and with Dad on Mondays and every other weekend. Her parents have been legally divorced for six months, but the divorce process began two years ago when Dad moved out of their home to live with another woman. Before this, Marianna had been a happy-go-lucky child who could frequently be seen skipping beside her mom with her Disney princess doll clasped in her arms. At eight years old, Marianna had been an average student, made friends easily, and loved everything princess.

Marianna found out her parents were divorcing on Christmas Day. That wasn’t the original plan. Initially, her parents’ plan was to go through the holidays as a family and wait until the new year to separate (and tell Marianna). However, when Dad stepped out of the room on Christmas morning to call his girlfriend while Marianna was opening her presents, her mom lost it. In the fierce argument that followed, Marianna learned that her dad was leaving her mom for another woman. Her dad packed a bag and left that day. Her mom shut herself in her bedroom and left Marianna wondering what to do with the Christmas present she had painstakingly made for her father. Now, at ten years old, Marianna will tell you that she hates Christmas.

Since the breakup of her parents’ marriage, Marianna has struggled with confusion, fear, anger, guilt, and depression. At first Marianna thought that maybe the divorce was because of her. She had heard her parents fighting about money before the breakup and thought that maybe if she hadn’t whined about wanting a new pair of shoes or a Disney princess bedroom, her parents wouldn’t have been unhappy.

Marianna was also confused about how to relate to her parents. She felt sorry for her mom because her dad had left her for another woman, but she had often seen her mom be mean to her dad, so she didn’t know what to think. Should she be loyal to her mom? Should she be loyal to her dad? And how should she view her dad’s girlfriend?

At times, Marianna has wished that she could live by herself and never see her parents again. Sometimes she has shut herself up in her room to try to escape. When Marianna can’t escape to her room, she gets angry. For example, one day when she was alone in her dad’s apartment with his girlfriend, Marianna got into a fight with her about eating her lunch. When Marianna wouldn’t eat the food on her plate, her dad’s girlfriend got mad and complained about Marianna to her dad when he returned from an errand. Infuriated, Marianna hotly asked why she should be expected to obey someone who broke up their family.

Marianna has had to change schools as a result of her parents’ divorce. Her mom couldn’t afford to stay in the house they had lived in before, and when they downsized, the new house was in a different school district. Marianna hasn’t tried to make friends at her new school. It’s easier to keep to herself than to go through the embarrassment of explaining to a new friend that her dad left her mom for another woman so she now lives with her mom part-time and with her dad part-time.
Unlike some children whose parents divorce, Marianna’s grades have improved. Because people you depend on can hurt you, Marianna intends to make good grades, get a degree in a field where she can make lots of money, and never need to depend on anyone again.

At this point, Marianna doesn’t have much trust or respect for either of her parents. Because her mom seems to be hurting the most, Marianna has chosen to be loyal to her, but it’s a loyalty that stems from duty, not love. She fights with both parents, and her parents fight with each other.

Going back and forth between her parents’ houses has left Marianna feeling like a visitor in both places. When asked to describe herself, Marianna says, “I’m just a suitcase.”

**Being a Child of Divorce Is Hard and All Too Common**

With the high rate of divorce in our culture, many of the children you counsel will have divorce in their family history, and it may not be something these children experience just once. The majority of men and women who divorce go on to remarry and, sadly, the divorce rate is even higher among those who do. This means that their children may live lives full of turmoil, with stepparents and stepsiblings coming in and out of their homes and lives.

Not surprisingly, research shows that after a divorce, it’s normal for children to struggle with the following responses to their situation:

1. Sadness and depression, fatigue, daydreams, bursting into tears, withdrawing from friends, difficulty concentrating, and, occasionally, plunging into schoolwork as a means of withdrawing.

2. Denial of what is happening.

3. Embarrassment, which may last for years.

4. Intense anger.

5. Guilt because of conflicting loyalties.

6. Concern about being cared for, even if the family is affluent.

7. Regression, lack of normal development, or return to dependency.

8. A maturity foisted upon them by circumstances that often separates the child from peers.

9. Physical symptoms, typically stomachaches or headaches. ¹

Obviously, the children you counsel may face many difficult struggles and temptations as a result of their parents’ decision to end their marriage.

Conflicts in Loyalty

One of the most difficult things children face after their parents’ divorce is the pressure they feel to choose sides. A nine-year-old girl I’ll call Sophie said this:

On Mother’s Day I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t even know what I should do or could do. If I went with my stepmother, my mother would be furious. If I went with my mother, my stepmother would be upset. I couldn’t even think about it. It’s the worst situation I ever had in my life.²

Marianna also has ongoing loyalty conflicts. The most recent one occurred when her teacher announced that next month the class was going to have a special program for parents. The teacher wanted everyone in the class to ask their parents to come. When Marianna asked her dad, he said he wouldn’t come unless he could bring his girlfriend. When Marianna asked her mom, her mom said she wouldn’t come if Dad’s girlfriend came with him.

Mixed with the stress, confusion, and guilt from feeling as though they must choose sides is the fear of being abandoned by one or both parents.

Both Sophie and Marianna face abandonment, at least temporarily, no matter what choice they make. If they choose dad’s side (or the side of their stepmother), their mother will, at least temporarily, withdraw love and treat them to some degree as an enemy. The reverse is also true. If they choose their mother, they risk being rejected by their father (and stepmother).

When you’re a child, how could you know if the abandonment will be temporary or permanent? You’ve just witnessed your parents permanently abandon each other. Perhaps they will abandon you as well. It’s no wonder children describe this as the worst situation they have ever faced.

And even if you have come to hate or despise one of your parents, no one wants to be hated back. We want people we hate to feel bad when we hate them, not hate us in return.

The gospel can become especially sweet in moments like these, because for those who have chosen to trust in the Lord, even if their father and mother abandon them, the Lord never will. These dear children need to be able to cling to a Father who will never abandon or forsake them.

While there are many important passages you’ll want to share with the children you counsel, let’s unpack just one psalm as an example of showing children the love and help of the Lord. Consider how Psalm 27 provides a gospel opportunity and sweet, sweet comfort for children struggling with loyalty conflicts. What follows are some suggestions on how to apply its truths to the children you counsel.

In Psalm 27:10 we hear the psalmist say,

² Patricia Papernow, Becoming a Stepfamily (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).
Even if my father and mother abandon me, 
the LORD will hold me close. (NLT)³

How precious is that! Even if the worst situation I could ever have in my life happens, and my father and mother forsake me, God won’t.

What gave the psalmist such confidence that he wouldn’t be abandoned by the Lord? Was it because he was such a good kid? Was it because he was smart, or funny, or a good athlete? No. He had such confidence because the Lord had promised to be his salvation if he trusted in him. The psalmist makes it obvious that this promise is the basis for his confidence throughout the psalm. In verse 1, he declares, “The Lord is my light and salvation.” In verse 9, he again pointedly identifies God as his Savior, his salvation. In other verses, the psalmist emphasizes that he trusts in the Lord because he seeks him and has confidence in him (vss 4, 5, 8, 13).

Because God is his Savior, the psalmist is able to say, even if my mom and dad abandon me, the Lord will still want me. This is not mere wishful daydreaming on the part of the psalmist; this is a promise made by the Father himself to those who belong to him. God has said, “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you” (Heb. 13:15). When we come to God through Christ Jesus our Lord, we become God’s children and nothing can separate us from his love (Rom. 8:38-39). He will never abandon us.

While their situation can still be tremendously difficult, children who have the Lord as their Savior can receive great comfort from knowing that they will never be abandoned by him. As part of their homework, you might ask children to write out Psalm 27:10 and Romans 8:38-39 on a piece of art paper and decorate it so that they can put it up in their room. You might ask the children to draw a picture of what these verses look like. You will probably want the children to review these verses so often that they know them by heart.

In future meetings, you might want to spend more time unpacking Psalm 27. Some of the points you may want the children to glean from Psalm 27 could include the following:

When the Lord is my light and salvation, I can be less afraid (verse 1).

The LORD is my light and my salvation—
so why should I be afraid?
The LORD is my fortress, protecting me from danger,
so why should I tremble? (NLT, vs. 1)

Have the children tell you some of the things that are scary to them because of their parents’ divorce. There are all kinds of good reasons to be afraid when your parents divorce. But when the Lord is our light and salvation, we can be less afraid. We’re not dependent on our parents to save us or protect us from permanent harm. We have the Lord as our salvation (Romans 8:15).

The psalmist is not brave (unafraid) because everything in his life is good (verses 2, 3, & 5).

Bad things are happening to this psalmist – people are attacking him. So the psalmist is not brave (unafraid) simply because everything in his life is safe and good. Yet even though people are attacking him, the psalmist says he won’t be afraid – instead he will be confident. Why is he confident? He’s confident because of what he said in verse 1 – God is his salvation and fortress. Because this is true, in verse 5 the psalmist says:

For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock. (vs. 5, new NIV)

Explain to the children that when you belong to the Lord, God will protect you so that nothing that happens to you can do permanent damage to your soul – nothing can hurt your soul beyond repair. In fact, God will use even the hard things for your good; he’ll use the hard things to make you more like Jesus (Romans 8:28-29).

One of the reasons the psalmist is able to be so brave is because the relationship he cares about the most is his friendship with the Lord (verse 4).

The one thing I ask of the LORD—
the thing I seek most—
is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
delighting in the LORD’s perfections
and meditating in his Temple. (NLT, vs. 4)

I might ask the child to read verse 4 and tell me who the psalmist’s BFF is. The psalmist’s best friend forever is God. When God is your best friend forever, you can always (forever) turn to God and he will be there to help you and love you.

Tell God you want his help (verse 7).

Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice,
And be gracious to me and answer me. (NASB)

When your parents divorce, it can seem like you have no one to help you. Because your parents are divorced and struggling, you may be trying not to bother them. Or, you may feel like you might get in trouble or even be abandoned if you ask them for help. But you can always ask for God’s help.

Just like the psalmist, you don’t need to worry that you’re bothering God by asking for his help, or be concerned that he’ll abandon you (remember vs. 10). Tell God that you want his help. Don’t act like you’ve got this and can handle it on your own.
God will often use his church to provide support for you. So your Sunday School teachers, your children’s or youth pastors, and your friends’ parents who know the Lord can encourage you and support you with God’s help. (Just like I’m trying to do in our time together.) Talk to them about how you are struggling. Let them help you.

*Decide to be loyal to God (verse 8).*

It’s really hard to figure out whether you should be loyal to your mom or your dad. The psalmist had a loyalty decision to make as well. He had to decide whether to be loyal to God or to someone else. According to this verse, he chose to be loyal to God.

*When You said, “Seek My face,” my heart said to You,*

*“Your face, O LORD, I shall seek.”* (NASB)

In other words, we could say that when God says, “Be loyal to me (seek my face),” you choose him to be the one to whom you will be loyal (your face, O Lord, I shall seek). Being loyal to God means choosing to do what he says as you try to love both of your parents. Being loyal to God means his opinion matters more to you than anyone else’s. Being loyal to God means you are always on his side.

Tell God, “I want to choose you – not mom first or dad first. I’ve decided I need to be loyal to you because you love me and are loyal to me!” As you do this, you’ll begin to find that even when your mom and dad are pressuring you to be loyal only to them, you won’t get as upset as you used to. Instead, you are able to remember that God is with you, that he won’t abandon you, and therefore you are not as vulnerable as you would be if your mom or dad were your source of security. God is your fortress, the one protecting you from any danger that would permanently destroy you, and using all other danger to turn bad things into good for you because of Jesus.

It will be hard to tell your parents that you are going to work hard to love them both and that the only person whose side you are going to choose is God’s side. But God will be with you, helping you when you have to do hard things like that. So Marianna can say to her parents, “Mom and Dad, I really want you to come to my special program at school, and I understand that it’s hard for the two of you to decide who should come and who shouldn’t come. I want you both there and I will be hurt if one of you can’t come. If you choose not to come, I’m sure I’ll be sad during the program, but I’m going to ask God to help me remember that he is there and that he won’t ever leave me. I’m going to ask God to give me the help I need to do my best, because I know that it’s always safe and secure to go to him.”

*Be confident that even if it’s hard for a while, it won’t always be this way (verse 13).*

Yet I am confident I will see the LORD’s goodness while I am here in the land of the living. (NLT)

Sometimes, no matter what decision you make, someone will be mad. If you choose to go with your mom, your dad and stepmom will be upset. If you choose to go with your dad and stepmom, your mom will be angry.
The psalmist also had people in his life who were angry with him. Yet the psalmist was confident that he was going to get to see good things while he was alive.

God tells us that now, for a little while, we may have to suffer grief in all kinds of hard things. But because of Jesus, the Father has something really good stored up for us (he calls it an inheritance) and this gift won’t ever get taken away. We won’t ever get tired of it, and we’ll never find anything better than this gift. Until then, God promises to shield you with his power (1 Peter 1:3-6).

*Wait for the Lord* (verse 14).

Wait patiently for the Lord.
Be brave and courageous.
Yes, wait patiently for the Lord. (NLT)

This situation isn’t going to go away right away. God can help you to be strong and brave and loyal to him. Wait for him to do what is right. Remember, he won’t forsake you, so even while you wait, he’ll be with you. Talk to your children’s pastor or Sunday School teacher about what you are experiencing. God wants to let them help you.

**Guilt**

As a counselor, you may also find that the children you counsel are struggling with guilt. Just as Marianna wondered if her parents got divorced because of her whining, the children you counsel may believe that they are the cause of their parents’ divorce. Even if they are assured by their parents that the divorce is not their fault, the children may find it difficult to trust that they are being told the truth.

Children may also struggle with guilt due to loyalty conflicts. If they choose to be loyal to Mom, they may feel guilty because they didn’t choose Dad. And if they choose to be loyal to Dad, they may feel guilty for not being loyal to Mom. Clearly, in Catch-22 situations such as these, the children will suffer. Additionally, children may experience guilt for disobedient or hateful choices they have made.

You can help these dear children by taking some time to unpack guilt so that the children can come to true and righteous conclusions. First, many children don’t understand that guilt is fact first, not feeling first. We are guilty whenever we violate the standard for love and obedience to God that God has given us in his Word. You might go to Matthew 22:37-40⁴ or Matthew 7:12⁵ to make this simple. We are all guilty (Romans 3:23).

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⁴ Matthew 22:37-40  And He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." "This is the great and foremost commandment. "The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (NASB)

⁵ Matthew 7:12 Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets. (NLT)
God has given us a conscience to help us feel bad when we are guilty, but our conscience doesn’t always work right. Sometimes we don’t feel bad even when we are guilty (for example, the child may have been happy that he got his way when he was being selfish), and sometimes we feel bad when we aren’t guilty (the child may feel bad because he thinks the divorce is his fault). That’s why it’s important to use the Bible as our standard of right and wrong, not just our feelings.

As you help these children with the issue of guilt, you’ll probably need to help them understand that each person will be accountable or responsible for his own sins, not for the sins of someone else (Rom. 14:12; Rev. 20:12-13). Again, unpack this slowly, perhaps using several examples to help the children grasp this concept. (I’m always amazed at the concepts children can grasp.)

If I were trying to explain this, I might set up an example such as the following:

What does the Bible say about stealing? Is it right or wrong (Ex. 20:15)?

What if your friend goes to the store and steals a candy bar? Is your friend guilty or not guilty? Why? [Guilty, because the Bible (God’s standard) says we are not supposed to steal.]

Are you guilty of stealing the candy bar? Who is guilty? Why?

What if nobody catches your friend? Is he guilty or not guilty?

What if your friend thinks it’s funny that he didn’t get caught and doesn’t feel bad about stealing? Is he guilty or not guilty? Why?

What if your friend blames you for his stealing the candy bar, because you had your own candy bar and you were mean and wouldn’t share it with him? Are you guilty for stealing the candy bar? [No.] Who is guilty for stealing the candy bar? Are you guilty for anything? [Yes, for being mean.]

Help the children resolve any true guilt by turning to God in repentance. Show the children that when we confess our sins (agree with God that what we did was wrong), God forgives us (1 John 1:9). You may want to walk through Psalm 103 to help the child understand what forgiveness from God is like. When God forgives, he doesn’t get even with us (Psalm 103:10); instead he gives us good things (Psalm 103:5) and crowns us with love and compassion (Psalm 103:4). This is because when we trust in Jesus as our Savior, he takes the punishment we deserve instead of us. We are forgiven. God can give us good things because Jesus took the bad things in our place.

You may want to have the children draw a picture of what it’s like to be forgiven and a picture of what it’s like not to be forgiven. Ask the children which picture best represents them.

A Word to the Parents
This may have been a hard chapter to read, knowing that your divorce has caused your children to struggle. If you are going through a divorce or have already divorced, you are probably suffering greatly. You probably understand the anguish that caused David to write:

Psalm 55:12-14

12 It is not an enemy who taunts me—
    I could bear that.
It is not my foes who so arrogantly insult me—
    I could have hidden from them.
13 Instead, it is you—my equal,
    my companion and close friend.
14 What good fellowship we once enjoyed
    as we walked together to the house of God. (NLT)

The person you thought you would spend the rest of your life with has become (in some ways) your enemy. You thought you would bring up your children together, watch their first steps together, go to their soccer games together, celebrate when they graduated from high school together and cry together when they left home to get married.

Now you’re alone, and trying to parent children alone is very hard. It’s made harder because you’re probably trying to do this while your wounds are still raw. You may barely make it through work each day without bursting into tears or exploding in frustration. After eight hours, all you may want to do is go home, be left alone, and try to survive. You need the comfort of the Lord as desperately as your children do, and you may wonder how you can possibly help your children when you feel like you are about to go under yourself.

Yet as you cling to the Lord as your Comforter and help, comfort begins to flow from you to your children (2 Cor. 1:3-5). Just as your suffering has probably made you more sensitive to what Christ suffered on your behalf, you’re now able to be more sensitive and effective in comforting your children, because you are also experiencing the comfort of Christ.

The apostle Paul experienced this kind of comfort when he faced situations that were far beyond his ability to endure. As you may know, Paul faced deadly perils, and even though the dangers you are facing are not the same as Paul’s, they are no less perilous. Dangers such as suicidal thinking, despair, bitterness, vengeance, and hopelessness may be battling to kill your soul. But as you set your hope on God to deliver you from these deadly perils, comfort can flow out of you to your children.

Both you and your children can cling to the Savior who will never leave you or forsake you. You can cling to the God of heaven who exchanged the life of his Son for your life because you are precious in his sight and because he loves you (Isa. 43:4, John 3:16).

To those who have trusted in Christ to be their Redeemer, God promises to be with them in deep waters and to forbid the waters from swallowing them up and drowning them.
With God as your helper, you will be given the strength to guide your children rather than shut them out in an effort to escape. With God as your helper, you will be given the strength to treat your former spouse with courtesy and consideration; with God as your helper you will be given the strength to encourage your children to have a good relationship with your former spouse (and his or her new mate if remarriage occurs) as well as with you. With God as your helper, you can humbly confess ways you may have sinned against your child and receive forgiveness both from God and your child.

Ways to reduce loyalty conflicts for your children.

As you’ve read, loyalty conflicts are one of the hardest things children face after the divorce of their parents. Although it will be hard, there are some things you can do to help mitigate this for your children.

Research has consistently shown that parents who work to maintain a courteous relationship with each other after a divorce greatly alleviate the pressure felt by their children to choose sides. Children tend to do better in all areas when their divorced parents have a solid working relationship with each other.

Of course, that’s easier said than done. For one thing, it is very tempting to want the children to side with you against their other parent. You may have been wronged, and having your children take your side may provide some vindication for the betrayal you are feeling.

Additionally, you’ve already lost your spouse. You may be concerned that if your children choose to be loyal to their other parent, you will lose them as well. Having such sorrow added to the grief you are already experiencing feels like it would be an unrecoverable loss.

Your former spouse may be attacking you in court trying to win custody. Your former spouse may be trying to win the affection of your children by offering gifts and not refusing them anything. Your former spouse may be very good at appearing likeable and innocent to everyone else, while you know from experience that it’s all a front.

The psalmist in Psalm 55 knew what this was like. In verses 20-21 he says,

\[
\text{My companion stretched out his hand against his friends;} \\
\text{he violated his covenant.} \\
\text{His speech was smooth as butter,} \\
\text{yet war was in his heart;} \\
\text{his words were softer than oil,} \\
\text{yet they were drawn swords. (ESV)}
\]

What do you do in situations like this? Did the psalmist figure it out? The psalmist did learn what to do and it’s something you can do as well. In verse 23, the psalmist gives this solution:

Cast your burden on the LORD (ESV).
The psalmist doesn’t just tell you what to do, he also tells you why. Cast your burden on the Lord because

he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved. (ESV)

As you cry out to God, evening, morning, and noon (see Psalm 55:17), God will hear your voice and give you the strength to help your children practice true biblical love toward both you and your former spouse.

Some ways to put this into practice might include:

- Pray daily with your children, asking God to bless your former spouse and your spouse’s new mate if there has been a remarriage.
- Help your children pick out cards and presents for your former spouse for birthdays and holidays.
- Save school papers on which your children did well so that they can show them to their other parent.
- Explain to your children that you want them to have a good relationship with your former spouse and any new family members your children might have, such as a stepparent or stepsiblings. Explain that you want your children to have the kind of love for their other family that God has for them.
- Require the children to participate in visitation (assuming they are safe) whether they want to or not. If your children have decided to be loyal to you, they may not want to be with their other parent. Treat visitation as an expected part of life and encourage the children to show love to their other parent (and new family members) during visitation. (You may also want to have the children develop regular habits of communication with the other parent in order to show love, such as calling them after school.)
- If possible, sit with your former spouse at events you both attend for your child.\(^6\) Do this even if your former spouse has begun a new romantic relationship and that means you’ll be sitting with your “replacement.” Unquestionably, this will require you to cry out to God with a fervor you may never have had before. Remember, your Savior will sustain you. He will never let the righteous fall or be moved. Situations like this will be terribly hard, but God won’t let them destroy you.

At this point, your future may look unendurably hard, but if you belong to the Lord, he will sustain you. Cling to him. He is a Savior who can bring beauty out of ashes and leave you with no regrets.

\(^6\) Obviously, there will some former spouses who won’t be willing to cooperate with you in this.