

Our Story

Since 1970 divorce has affected over a million children each year. According to recent statistics, more than half of all children will experience the divorce of their parents by their eighteenth birthday.¹ Of these, over half will also see the breakup of a parent's second marriage. Another 10 percent will go on to witness three or more family breakups, all before age eighteen.² These numbers don't even take into account those who face their parents' divorce as adults. Today, more than 40 percent of all American adults between ages eighteen and forty are children of divorce.³

But these statements represent more than sad statistics to us. Those of us who grew up in the '70s and '80s are the first divorce generation, Generation Ex. Despite the assuring claims of *Cosmo* and company—which convinced our parents that our well-being depended more on their happiness than their commitment—society is now beginning to realize what we have known all along: Divorce is not simply a bump in the road for the children affected by it.

Can you identify?

- You're afraid of falling in love but really want to.
- You've turned into a perfectionist.
- You're afraid that even though someone says, "I love you," ultimately that person might leave you.
- For you, trust comes in hard-earned degrees.
- You're not sure where home is, or you aren't so sure you want to accept the home that society has defined for you.

- You wonder if you will ever have your entire family in the same room without fighting or awkward silence.
- You have holes in your history.
- You aren't sure what a healthy marriage looks like.

All these are typical effects of divorce on children. Divorce alters our identities. It clouds the lens through which we understand the world. It weakens the foundation of our emotional development. As children, we likely were not able to comprehend the difference between our parents not loving each other and not loving us: Why would a daddy who says he loves me choose not to live with me? If Mommy is the center of my world, why am I not the center of hers?

Many of us stuffed our feelings of betrayal, rejection, fear, anger, and abandonment. In the backs of our minds, we consoled ourselves with the hope that things would get better when we were on our own. However, after we left the nest, our parents' divorce continued to affect us. As we seek our own romantic relationships, we discover we don't know how to create what we desire, and the fear that we'll re-create what we've left behind consumes us.

If our parents' decision to divorce were truly a healthy one because it offered the potential for a happier home, then why do so many of us still struggle decades later with issues of abandonment, trust, commitment, and making our own marriages work?

Divorce is often *the* defining event of our life, and the implications of our parents' choice continue to ripple throughout our life.

Social History

This news makes a lot of people squirm. As children of divorce, we certainly don't want to believe that our hurts will last a lifetime. We'd much rather believe the lie we've been told: that the divorce—and its impact on us—is in the past.

We live in a country where people value independence and will fight to defend their entitlements. The fundamental right to divorce has become as cherished an American tradition as baseball and apple pie.

When Governor Ronald Reagan of California signed the first no-fault divorce law into effect in 1969, the cultural gatekeepers heralded the event as a major victory for the betterment of marriage. The thinking was that if couples were free to—without assigning blame—end marriages that did not fulfill them personally, then the marriages they would subsequently enter would be more satisfying. This marked a significant shift in the universal understanding of the purpose of marriage. As Barbara Dafoe Whitehead explains in her book *The Divorce Culture*, prior to the late '60s, marriage was seen as a societal obligation. Society at large placed great pressure on couples to work out their differences so they could raise healthy, well-adjusted children who would become productive members of society. After the late '60s, marriage was seen as a choice of personal expression. With that choice came the freedom, even the right, to choose to leave the marriage if it was no longer bringing about the personal satisfaction a man or woman expected.⁴ Popular literature assured our parents that divorce was like any other crisis and, after a short period of transition, we would all recover, if not be better for it. Happier parents made for better parents and, in a sort of trickle-down philosophy, happier children. As a result of this shift in law and attitudes, the number of “expressive divorces” climbed steadily. Statistics have shown that despite the former partners’ hope that they could find more happiness in a second marriage, second attempts are more likely to end in divorce (60 percent) than first marriages (50 percent).⁵

A Lone Voice in the Sociological Wilderness

This paradigm shift in thinking intrigued Dr. Judith Wallerstein, widely considered the world’s foremost authority on the long-term effects of

divorce. In 1971, she began a longitudinal study of sixty divorced parents and their 131 children. The study included in-depth interviews with parents and children for a six-week period following the final separation and again at eighteen months, five years, ten years, fifteen years, and twenty-five years following the divorce. The results, which she details in her books *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children a Decade After Divorce* and *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, are sobering. At the fifteen-year mark, these children, now in their late twenties and early thirties, were struggling to establish secure love relationships of their own. Each day they were still reliving the feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and rejection. Fifteen years after the crisis, the divorce still formed the template to which each relationship was compared. Many of those children who seemed to adjust well to their parents' divorce as children experienced as adults what Wallerstein calls the "sleeper effect."⁶ At each crucial passage of the child's life—and most especially when the child attempted to form his or her own romantic relationships—the impact of the divorce struck with renewed intensity, crippling the adult child's ability to create healthy attachments. (We'll discuss the sleeper effect more thoroughly in chapter 8.)

Wallerstein's book was not received well because it ran counter to what society wanted to believe. It was, however, embraced by Christians and family-rights organizations, a great irony in that Judith Wallerstein does not profess to be a Christian and isn't an advocate of marriage at all costs. Admittedly, her sampling was a small representation of white, middle-class Americans in a single California county. But her purpose was simply to chronicle the experience of divorce by measuring the emotional effects. As I read her book, I found myself thinking, *This is me!* Reading Wallerstein's book assured me that I'm not the only adult child of divorce who struggles to reconcile past, present, and future.

But despite Wallerstein's research, the controversy surrounding divorce continues.

An Exaggeration?

In January 2002, E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly caused quite a stir with their book *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*. The authors asserted that research shows that lifelong effects of divorce are greatly exaggerated. While they concede that divorce does have negative effects, the researchers found that only 20 to 25 percent of children of divorce suffered long-term damage—defined as lasting social, emotional, or psychological problems—as opposed to just 10 percent of adults from intact families.⁷

Elizabeth Marquardt, an affiliate scholar with the Institute of American Values and a child of divorce, took issue with this conclusion in a 2002 *Washington Post* article. She wrote:

I've interviewed dozens of young adults from divorced families. The details vary, but all tell stories equally complex. . . . Because I met with college graduates, most of the people I was interviewing had achieved a certain level of success. If you gave them a questionnaire and asked, for instance, if they had ever been arrested, dropped out of school or been diagnosed with a mental illness, practically every one of them could respond "no." But that does not mean they were unaffected by their parents' divorce.

Those of us who have experienced the losses of divorce know the truth. I'm 31 years old. I'm a writer, just as I always wanted to be. I have a graduate degree from the University of Chicago, a loving husband and supportive family and friends. From the outside, I look pretty successful. But I have a complex story that, especially through my early years, was largely shaped by my parents' divorce. . . . I have never doubted their love for me. But for as long as I can remember, they led completely separate lives. I lived with my mother during the school year and my father during summers and

holidays. I did not lose either of my parents, but a reunion with one was always a parting from the other, and the longing I felt for each of them produced sadness and a fear of loss that persisted when I grew up. Their divorce doesn't explain all that I am, but the way it shaped my childhood is central to understanding who I am.⁸

For adult children of divorce, our parents' divorce is the Achilles heel to our well-being. For years, our successes at school and work have been heralded as examples of our resilience, when in reality, it was our dogged pursuit of perfection and our insecurities about our own worthiness that fueled the fires of our ambitions. Our "well-adjusted acceptance" was more a desperate effort to restore peace and stability to our fluctuating families. Our activities simply offered an escape from the stresses at home. As the tensions increased—before and after divorce papers were signed—so did our proficiencies. Football drills were nothing compared to enduring the sparring between Mom and Dad. The collective cacophony of squeaky violins, pulsing drums, pounding keyboards, and amplified guitars not only required our concentration but also provided more consolation than the sounds of silence.

We Pay the Price

In her book, Wallerstein focuses on the effects of divorce on parents as well as children, and while her research finds that divorce has mixed results for the parent, it shows that overwhelmingly, divorce is a losing situation for children. Her key reason for this conclusion? Divorce is the only crisis where parents put their own wants before children's needs. In defense of the divorcing couple, the decision to divorce is often thought of as a means to providing a better environment for their children, because ideally, the breakup of the marriage will pave the way for a happier home.

In reality, however, parents establishing separate households often tend first to their own needs. As Wallerstein so aptly wrote, “In the crisis of divorce, mothers and fathers put children on hold, attending to adult problems first.”⁹ If our custodial parent pursues a new love relationship during this transition, our feeling of being second priority deepens. We miss out on the nurturing we need when our parents are licking their wounds or looking outside the home for a comforting salve. We need parents, and the best we sometimes get is a roommate. While a parent understands that this upheaval comes with the transition, the child whose emotional growth is stunted does not know the chaos is temporary.¹⁰

Our perspective on the divorce differs vastly from that of our parents. We do not perceive divorce as a second chance, and this is part of our pain. Divorce shatters our sense of home. As much as our parents strive to convince us otherwise, we still feel rejected because the thing we expect as our right—stability for our formative years—has been taken away without our approval.

Custody arrangements are often made for our parents’ convenience, not our growing needs. As teenagers, we are forced to choose between spending time with friends or our other parent. What should be the natural process of establishing independence becomes an agonizing source of guilt. If we choose the football game and homecoming dance over a weekend with Dad, what does that tell him about our feelings toward him? Divorce is a price *we* pay as our parents fail to fulfill our unspoken expectation: Parents are supposed to make sacrifices for us, not vice versa.¹¹

Finally, after years of being the objects of intellectual discussion, we have reached an age where we can speak for ourselves.

Generation Ex Speaks

In his October 4, 2002, article in the *Washington Times*, Steve Beard examined the plethora of divorce-inspired songs in light of the commercial

success of Pink's "Family Portrait." He wrote, "Pink's lyrics touch a raw nerve in a generation that grew up with ringside seats to divorce and abandonment. While their parents were singing songs of protest about foreign wars and civil rights, a new breed of songwriters relates more closely to the combat zone of their homes."¹² A symphony of sorrows is being composed by a generation of musicians still struggling with the scars from divorces decades old. Blink 182, Everclear, Go Fish, FFH, Korn, Lifehouse, Linkin Park, Nickelback, Papa Roach, Pink, Slipknot, Staind, Tait, and countless others speak in eloquent song to voice the hurts of a broken generation.

For too long we have debated without representation. In an effort to calm our parents' consciences, we've been urged to suffer in silence. Society's unspoken expectation is that we should just "get over it." Things could be much worse, you know. "Lots of parents divorce," we're told, as if the commonality of our pain lessens the severity of it. To tell us, "You're a mature kid; you'll be fine," is like telling the NFL player out with a career-ending injury the week before his first Super Bowl, "It's okay; you can still watch the game."

Negating our devastation is as destructive as ignoring it. Divorce *hurts*. Rather than acknowledge how divorce has affected us, society asks us to be nice and put up with the consequences of it. Bob, whose parents divorced when he was eleven, laments, "I hated my stepmom because she was the one that broke up my family. And yet I had to visit and eat turkey and mashed potatoes with her and always treat her as if she were an old friend of the family." Oddly enough, it was often *our* failure to accept such changes that marked us as truly troubled. But why shouldn't we be troubled by the breakup of our homes? Just because our voices weren't heard (or acknowledged) doesn't mean that our questions didn't exist.

Divorce is hard on *any* child, at *any* age. We need the stability of our parents for our entire lives. Our folks don't give up their parenting role simply because we have left home. We still look to our parents to guide us

and affirm us through life decisions such as settling on our college major, deciding where to live, making career choices, selecting a spouse, and raising our own children. Those of us whose parents divorced when we were young may grow up with holes in our histories because events, if they can be recalled at all, may be tainted with bitterness or rage. And those of us who were eighteen or older when our parents divorced share the issues of self-doubt and fear of intimacy but have the additional guilt of wondering if our parents sacrificed happiness in life because of us. All we knew turned out to be a facade. And if we're married—especially to someone just like Mom or Dad—we fear we're destined to divorce as well. We may seem happy now, but the other shoe will eventually drop.

For *adult* children of divorce frustrated with a lack of support for their grief, I offer this analogy: Imagine you are putting together a puzzle and have only a few pieces left when someone comes in and knocks over the table, scattering all the pieces to the floor. Does the fact that you were almost done lessen the frustration you feel over having to start over? The pain of those who experience parental divorce when they are adults is often downplayed. The truth is that divorce is still a major setback because, as you start to reassemble your work, you find that the picture you have been studying has changed. Each puzzle piece must be re-examined to see if it still fits the photo of your memory. While those who were young when their parents divorced don't have a picture to compare their puzzle pieces to, adult children of divorce question the validity of their history, their values, and their memories because their foundation has been torn away. After a lifetime of looking up to Mom and Dad and consciously or unconsciously viewing that marriage as a correct picture, they are overwhelmed by the thought that what they once knew as truth has been revealed as a lie.

Responses to divorce may differ, but each divorce is distressing because it represents an unwelcome revision of the way we have come to understand the world.

Why Look Back?

Why is it important to address the issues that arise from our parents' divorce? Because until we have a firm sense of our own past—both good and bad—and begin to heal from it, we won't have a solid foundation for building the future we hope to have. Children of divorce are much like adult adoptees struggling with an unknown past. The adoptee's past is hidden; ours is ignored. The adoptee wrestles with the transition from being unwanted to being chosen. The child of divorce struggles to understand how she can be loved when one or both parents—from her perspective—have abandoned her.

We've been told to accept the divorce as part of our past, but until we acknowledge the feelings and effects of it, we will not be able to break free of our past's power to affect our present and our future. It's easier to ignore or stuff our feelings than it is to express or experience them. This fear of feeling causes us to build walls. In an ongoing effort to regain stability, we try to control our environment. We make those around us jump through hoops, yet we run away from any hoops presented to us. We expect others to love us unconditionally before we remove the conditions from our love. Often, we're blind to the mixed messages we send.

Perhaps you've come to believe that divorce is normal and acceptable. Perhaps you've lowered your expectations as a way to deal with your parents' divorce by telling yourself:

- My marriage will probably fail, so I'll just enjoy it while it lasts.
- The only way I can avoid divorce is to not marry, so I'll live with my significant other instead.
- Even Christians divorce, so why should I follow an outdated tradition of faith?

One thirty-four-year-old doggedly expressed his acceptance of his parents' divorce by saying, "I'm an adult, and I have dealt with it in an adult way. It was not my fault, nor my responsibility. I can't fix it, so I've

moved on.” While there is truth to his statements, his wife of four years jumped in to tell him, “You have no idea how much the divorce has influenced you and our marriage. You have not dealt with it, and you won’t ever talk about it so that we can deal with it. Sometimes I’m not sure if I’m dealing with you as an adult, or if I’m really interacting with a hurt child. I wish I knew so I could help *us*.”

No doubt about it, humans are a flawed group. We fail to live up to our own lofty expectations every day. Does that mean we should quit trying? Of course not! The athlete doesn’t quit practicing in the midst of pain. He keeps at it because the goal of winning offers more satisfaction than any relief from his present discomfort. A mountain climber is not satisfied with *attempting* to climb Mount Everest. The pleasure comes with reaching the summit. No one who’s been married will tell you that the union is easy, but any couple who has celebrated a fiftieth anniversary will testify that the sum of the ebb and flow of marital satisfaction is far more fulfilling than the strain of any particular incident. In fact, it’s often through the trials, one might argue, that a marriage is strengthened. Few things are more deeply satisfying than accomplishing that which was thought impossible.

The Love They Lost Versus the Love We Want

Children of divorce are caught between two equally dominant pulls. On the one hand, the love we seek represents all the love and security we lost. On the other hand, the fear of failing at love, or becoming what we despise, immobilizes us. One divorced dad told me that he couldn’t understand why his son would remain married in a situation that made him so obviously miserable. His son had spent the twenty-some years after his parents’ divorce trying to be all the things he perceived his father was not. If his marriage failed, in his mind, he would become just like his dad. It was easier to stay in an unhappy marriage than face the possibility of empathizing with his dad and the decision he made years before.

Stephanie Staal crafted an excellent collage of our collective conscience in her book *The Love They Lost: Living with the Legacy of Our Parents' Divorce*. Where Wallerstein's book is objective, Staal's is personal. Where Wallerstein observes, Staal reflects. Again, familiar themes surface as a hundred voices unite: Divorce defines our identity. Divorce morphs the cement of stability into the sand of uncertainty. Divorce skews our understanding of bedrock concepts such as home, family, and love. And once again, the effects of our parents' divorce fully impact us when we pursue our own romantic relationships because, as Staal explains, "We knew too much about how relationships end before our own relationships have even started."¹³

Affirming the idea that divorce is never a dead issue, she concludes:

How do I write a conclusion to a story that is still unfolding for so many of us, including me? I don't have a perfect ending to offer you. My parents still make unpleasant remarks and intimations about each other. I still have to figure out where I'm going to spend my holidays. I still haven't put on a white dress and walked down the aisle, moved by a renewed faith in love. I still wonder, if I ever have children, will their grandparents be able to sit together in the same room? I still feel twinges of sadness at the oddest moments, and I still have an armful of memories that hurt when I squeeze them.¹⁴

Moving Beyond the Legacy of Our Past

While it's true that we will continue to wrestle with the impact of divorce throughout our life, as Christians we are not alone in our struggle, and we have access to Someone who can offer us wisdom and healing as we seek to change our involuntary inheritance.

It wasn't until twenty-five years after my mom and dad's divorce that

I had this epiphany: I am choosing to derive my identity from a past event over which I had no control, when God is offering me the opportunity to choose an identity that affirms my future with Him!

Exodus 34:6-7 reads:

I am the LORD, the merciful and gracious God. I am slow to anger and rich in unfailing love and faithfulness. I show this unfailing love to many thousands by forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. Even so I do not leave sin unpunished, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations. (NLT)

Our prayers are echoed in Psalm 79:8:

Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers; may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need.

Though it isn't popular to admit, divorce is sin. It is—like all sin—a decision that places a wedge between God and sinner, and must be confessed to restore spiritual intimacy. Our parents' decision to divorce was sinful, but it is—like all sin—forgivable. God is compassionate and gracious. He forgives all who seek to be forgiven. However, while forgiveness affects the eternal ramifications of our sins, it does not necessarily take away the earthly consequences of our choices. Divorce is a prominent example of generational sin. As with alcoholism and other hereditary tendencies, our parents passed down to us the propensity to divorce. Statistics tell us that without intentional intervention—taking action to learn different patterns of relating—we are likely to follow in our parents' footsteps.

As adults we are now responsible for our own choices. Simply stomping our feet and saying, "I will *not* get divorced!" is not enough. As my

friend Heather so clearly articulates, “If children who are from dysfunctional homes don’t set out to learn how to handle things differently, they are almost certain to re-create the only situation they’ve ever known.” If we grew up with insecurity, instability, and chaos, we may inadvertently use those characteristics to sabotage healthy relationships because those are the traits for which we have developed coping mechanisms.

Instead of living our life in response to our past, we can choose to go to God for healing and to live our life in anticipation of the future He promises us. Millions of us share the experience of divorce. While the deck may seem stacked against us, we have the ultimate wild card. As Christians, we have a permanent place in our Abba Father’s family. His love for us is unconditional. His resources are unending, and His faithfulness is unfailing. We have been gifted with unique talents, abilities, and passions. We have been created with a purpose. Our family is as broad as the millions of fellow believers around the world and as specific as the mentors we adopt and the accountability groups we form. Love has been perfectly personified in Jesus Christ. Through His offer of adoption, we are able to discover hope and find home as Abba’s children.

Are you ready to begin the healing process? Step one is making peace...

Word

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.
(Romans 8:28)

Reflect

- How many of your friends are children of divorced parents?
- Did you ever feel that you were missing out on what others had because of your parents’ divorce? Give an example.

- Was there a particular event that illustrated to you that your parents' divorce was still affecting your life as an adult? Describe it.
- If you were asked to introduce yourself and your life in fifty words, what would you say?
- What challenges have you faced in establishing your own relationships?
- Spend some time reflecting on the thoughts and memories that resurfaced as you read this chapter. Be specific.
- What do you hope to gain from reading this book?

Challenge

Select a book from the reading list below. As you read it, allow memories to surface. Capture them in your journal.

Read

The Divorce Culture by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead (Knopf, 1997)

The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce by Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee (Hyperion, 2000)

The Love They Lost: Living with the Legacy of Our Parents' Divorce by Stephanie Staal (Delacorte Press, 2000)

Split: Stories from a Generation Raised on Divorce by Ava Chin (Contemporary Books, 2002)