

5.

What are the possible consequences of divorce for children?

Divorce is a life-transforming experience. After divorce, childhood is different. Adolescence is different. Adulthood—with the decision to marry or not and have children or not—is different. Whether the outcome is good or bad, the whole trajectory of an individual's life is profoundly altered by the divorce experience.

—Dr. Judith S. Wallerstein, noted divorce researcher¹⁴⁴

Overview: Divorce generally puts children at greater risk for many kinds of problems. However, most children of divorce do not experience those serious problems; most children are strong and resilient, and most have returned to a pretty normal life after 2–3 years. The problems children of divorce may experience are often present even before the divorce, perhaps the result of conflict between parents, less attention from parents, depression, or other factors. Children in a high-conflict marriage situation generally are better off if their parents decide to divorce compared to children whose parents stay married and continue to experience high levels of conflict. Children in low-conflict marriage situations, however, generally do worse when their parents divorce compared to children whose parents stay married and keep trying to work things out. Children are developing physically, socially, emotionally, educationally, morally, and spiritually; research shows that divorce can affect children in each of these developmental areas. In adulthood, children of divorce are 2–3 times more likely to experience a divorce compared to children who did not experience a divorce growing up.

When thinking about the possibility of a divorce, one of the most important things that people think about is how divorce will affect their children. “Janet” told us in our interview with her how central this concern had been to her:

My children would cry every time Daddy left the house [while we were separating]. They would just be sobbing and crying for Daddy, and I would be holding them. And of course I wanted the marriage to work. And it was very difficult. What was difficult was to watch it hurting them and then not being able to do anything about that; to bring this pain into my children's life and not be able to stop that, because you are the guardian and caretaker of children.

In a 2008 survey of more than 2,000 California adults, two out of three divorced Californians said their divorce negatively impacted their children.¹⁴⁵ It would be nice if we could provide you with a simple, straightforward answer to whether divorce will be harmful to your children. Yes, overall, good research over many years does find that children who experience the divorce of their parents are at higher risk for a wide range of negative consequences, usually two to three times the risk compared to children who do not go through a divorce. The best circumstance for children is a stable home with two parents who are happy. If an unhappy marriage can be repaired over time so that both partners can be reasonably happy, this will probably be the best situation for the children. If, however, a divorce is necessary, it is important to know what research says about how divorce affects children. In this chapter we briefly summarize what we know from good research about the effects of family breakdown on children.

A. Why are some children more affected by divorce than others?

People rightly worry about the harm to children of divorce. But things are more complicated than a simple assertion of harm. First, although divorce generally puts children at greater risk for many kinds of problems, most children do not experience those serious problems, even though the experience of divorce is personally painful for almost all children. It turns out that children generally are strong and resilient. And research suggests that even though divorce can be very upsetting to children, most adjust to their new life after 2–3 years.¹⁴⁶ Of course, this is a general statement; some children are not as resilient as others and are more likely to be affected negatively by the divorce. And even resilient children report long-term challenges. In one study of young adults attending a prestigious university (and were doing well) who had experienced a divorce growing up, half still said that they worried about big events, such as graduation and weddings, when both parents would be present. Similarly, nearly half felt that they had a harder childhood than most and that their parents' divorce still caused struggles for them. More than a quarter wondered if their father even loved them.¹⁴⁷

A second complicating factor is that the problems children of divorce may experience are certainly not just the result of a divorce. That is, the problems children of divorce may experience are often present even before the divorce, perhaps because of conflict between parents, less attention from parents, a parent's depression, or other

factors. So divorce may just be an obvious target to blame when the bigger problem is that the children were experiencing the problems of their parents' unhappiness and associated problems. On the other hand, for many children, conflict between parents increases after divorce rather than decreases. So sometimes the actual divorce is the source of more difficulties for children.

One child of divorce we know expressed his gratitude that his parents had never made him choose one parent over the other. His parents were able to talk through their problems and make a decision for the benefit of their child. He was grateful that he was not put in the middle. Another child of divorce we know had a very different experience; the parents forced each child in the family to make a decision when they were ten years old on which parent they would live with. This was very difficult for the children. Still another individual we know grew up in a family with a marriage that was very rocky due to addictions. He felt his success in life was the direct product of the tremendous sacrifices his mother made. He and his siblings are very grateful that their mother and father worked through their difficult issues. All of the children in this family now have happy marriages.

There are no easy answers
to the question of how
divorce may affect children.

Life is complicated, circumstances are unique, and individuals are different, so there are no easy answers to the question of how divorce may affect children. But good research has been able to provide some general clues that can help you understand how divorce might affect your children. Here are a couple of important factors to consider.

High-conflict vs. low-conflict marriage. In earlier chapters, we explained that half or more of all divorces come from marriages that were not experiencing high levels of conflict. In high-conflict marriages, conflicts and problems are probably visible to all members of the family, including children. In a high-conflict marriage there is yelling, screaming, and throwing things; sometimes there is even violence and abuse. But in a low-conflict marriage in which one or both spouses are unhappy, the problems are usually not so public and noticeable; marital problems are more private and children are unlikely to know that anything is seriously wrong. Research suggests that children in a high-conflict marriage are actually better off, on average, if their parents decide to divorce, compared to children whose parents stay married and continue to experience high levels of conflict.¹⁴⁸ These children almost expect or even sometimes hope that their parents will decide to separate. This is probably not the case for children in low-conflict marriages, however. These children generally do somewhat worse when their parents divorce compared to children whose parents stay married and keep trying to work things out. It seems these children are not aware of their parents' unhappiness and the discovery that their parents are divorcing and the family is breaking up can be devastating. It is important to note that different children may have their own perceptions of their parents' marriage, and a divorce can be devastating in any situation.¹⁴⁹

But the children who seem to be hardest hit by divorce are those whose parents weren't having a lot of conflict. As we discussed earlier in Chapter 2, if you are in a low-conflict but unhappy marriage there may be ways to make your marriage happy again. If this is possible, this will probably be best for your children. If you are in a high-conflict marriage, your children are probably aware of your problems and your unhappiness, especially if they are older; they may better understand that a divorce is needed to make life better for them and you.

Resilient vs. at-risk children. One of the foremost researchers on the effects of divorce described children's experience of divorce this way: "For a young child, psychologically, divorce is the equivalent of lifting a hundred-pound weight over the head. Processing all the radical and unprecedented changes—loss of a parent, loss of a home, of friends—stretches immature cognitive and emotional abilities to the absolute limit and sometimes beyond that limit."¹⁵⁰ Some children are stronger or more resilient than others. The less resilient children are the ones most likely not to adjust well to all the stresses and changes and losses that usually accompany divorce. So consider carefully characteristics in your children that might indicate that they will have a harder time adjusting to the divorce. For instance, research suggests that a child's temperament makes a difference in how a child adapts to divorce. If a child is agreeable and adapts easily to different situations, then she or he usually adjusts better to divorce. Similarly, if a child has good social skills—warm with others, understanding of others and their feelings, uses humor, etc.—then he or she usually adapts better. Also, interestingly, research suggests that children who are more physically attractive have an easier time adjusting.¹⁵¹

Parenting behavior. Children's characteristics can make a difference in how they adjust to divorce, but research suggests that the quality of parenting they receive is probably the most important factor. Unfortunately, because of all the stresses in their lives, divorcing parents are less likely to be effective in their parenting, to be harsher or more permissive. "Janet" was very honest about this with us in her interview:

And you're just such a . . . wreck [right after the divorce]; you're just such a wreck for your kids, and for everyone. . . . I lived with my parents [when I first got divorced]. . . . But it was a little hard because . . . little kids of divorce are usually poorly behaved, and there is a lot of compensating, and you're just so exhausted. You don't always have consistent discipline and love and everything.

One teenage girl we know confided that her parents had put her in the middle of their divorce. Her mother inappropriately confided in this young girl many of her relationship problems. This stripped her of the carefree innocence she once had. The girl began to fail in school and felt burdened by her parents' expectations that she take messages back and forth and smooth conflicts between her divorced parents. Another couple we know divorced in a very friendly way and did it without using attorneys. Unfortunately, as soon as one of the spouses remarried six months later, they regularly ended up calling in the police to resolve their fights at parent-time exchanges.

So as hard as it can be, you need to make good parenting a high priority in your life, whether you stay together or get a divorce. Some do a very good job of this. One couple we know decided after the divorce to make cooperative parenting their top priority. They were able to be very flexible in the way they used their parent time. They both came to all of the children's activities and were able to have an active life raising their children together but in different households. They were able to have monthly parenting meetings and communicate well regarding any issues with their children.

Box 5.1 has suggestions for good books to read about the effects of divorce on children and effective parenting after divorce.

If you divorce and have children, you will be required by the State of Utah to participate in a class designed to help with parenting after divorce. Classes like this can help parents be more sensitive to their children's needs after divorce.¹⁵² If you do not divorce, it is still important to understand how the quality of your marriage can affect your parenting.

A large body of research provides strong evidence that conflict between parents negatively affects their children's well-being.¹⁵³ Whether the parents stay married or divorce, it is important to minimize the conflict. Many parents who struggle with marital conflict and divorce give their children less attention and may even reject or withdraw from their children.¹⁵⁴ Parents experiencing marital conflict tend to use harsher and more inconsistent discipline¹⁵⁵ and have more conflict with their children.¹⁵⁶ These negative parenting behaviors likely explain a great deal of the emotional, behavioral, social, and health problems some children experience after divorce.¹⁵⁷

If parents maintain warm and positive relationships with their children, they lower the risk that their children will suffer these negative consequences.¹⁵⁸ Using consistent,

Setting appropriate limits and consequences for misbehavior can help reduce problems with children.

appropriate discipline for misbehavior, such as setting appropriate limits and consequences,¹⁵⁹ can also help reduce misbehavior and other problems children may experience.¹⁶⁰ A specific technique that can help children deal with the stress of marital conflict or divorce is "emotion coaching," which is helping your child become aware of his or her emotions and talking about and acting on them appropriately.¹⁶¹ When children use this

skill, they can avoid many of the negative outcomes associated with marital conflict.¹⁶² Emotion coaching also can help parents handle their own emotions better and be less hostile in marital conflict. In Box 5.2 we highlight a book that can teach you this valuable skill of emotion coaching. In addition, you may benefit from doing Exercise 5.1, "How Well Might My Children Adjust to Divorce?" at the end of the chapter.

We have been discussing the effects of divorce as if effects were one general thing. But they are actually many different things. The process of family disruption marked by

divorce can affect children in many developmental areas. Next we summarize the research on the effects of divorce on children's specific developmental areas.

Box 5.1: Recommended Books about the Effects of Divorce on Children and Effective Parenting

•*For Better or Worse: Divorce Reconsidered, Surprising Results from the Most Comprehensive Study of Divorce in America*, by Dr. E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.

•*The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-year Landmark Study*, by Dr. Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee. New York: Hyperion, 2000.

•*The Truth about Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Thrive*, by Dr. Robert E. Emery. New York: Viking Press, 2004.

B. What are the possible social, emotional, and physical health consequences of divorce?

While many children grow up leading healthy and productive lives after a divorce occurs, they are at greater risk for emotional and physical problems. Some children are more emotionally affected by divorce than others. But some do not experience serious, long-term emotional problems.

Persistent feelings of loneliness are common in children of divorce.¹⁶³ One study found that nearly half (44%) of children of divorce many years later said “I was alone a lot as a child” compared to only about one in seven children from intact families.¹⁶⁴ That loneliness comes in several ways. It's common for children to “lose” a parent, usually the father, from divorce. While many fathers try to stay actively involved in the lives of their children, research shows that after a couple of years most fathers—maybe as many as 70%—do not have much contact with their children.¹⁶⁵ Of course, if mothers are working more (or get involved in dating again) after the divorce then children may feel a loss of time with their mothers, as well.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps the loss of time with fathers and mothers explains that, later in life, adult children of divorce are about 40% less likely to say they see either their mother or father at least several times a week, and they rate their current relationships with both mother and father less positively than do children from intact marriages.¹⁶⁷ Children of divorce also can lose contact with grandparents.¹⁶⁸ Also, it is common for children to have to move when their parents divorce. This can result in a loss of friendships that contributes to children's feelings of loneliness.¹⁶⁹

A child's emotional security also becomes more fragile during this difficult time of divorce. Fears that both parents will abandon the child are common. Depending on the age of the child, some of the ways a child might express this emotional insecurity may be:

- ❖ large amounts of anger, directed both toward others and themselves
- ❖ frequent breaking of rules



Research has found that children who are able to deal with their emotions experience increased confidence, greater physical health, and better academic performance and social relationships. Research by Dr. John Gottman has shown that principles of emotional intelligence can even help children escape some of the consequences associated with marital conflict, which may be particularly helpful for children whose parents are at the crossroads of divorce.

The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child
Dr. John M. Gottman, with Joan DeClaire. New York: Fireside, 1997.

This book focuses on five principles of emotional intelligence that parents can use to help children of any age master their emotions. These principles involve being aware of a child's emotions, recognizing emotional expression as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching, listening empathetically and validating children's feelings, labeling emotions in words a child can understand, and helping children come up with an appropriate way to solve a problem or deal with upsetting issues or situations.

- ❖ sleep problems
- ❖ defying parents or teachers
- ❖ frequent guilt
- ❖ increasing isolation or withdrawal from friends and family
- ❖ drug and/or alcohol abuse
- ❖ early sexual activity
- ❖ thoughts of suicide or violence

Many children of divorce believe that they caused the divorce or that they did something wrong that made one or both parents not want to be with them. These feelings can cause a child to feel sad, depressed, and angry.¹⁷⁰ These negative emotions can contribute to other problems, such as poor health, difficulty in school, and problems with friends, to name a few. Parents can help their children avoid some of the negative consequences of these emotions by using “emotion coaching,” a process of helping children be aware of and talk about their emotions. See Box 5.2 to learn about a book that can help you learn this skill. (Also, you may be interested in looking at the Resource List for helpful community resources for your children at the end of Chapter 8.)

Children who experience the divorce of their parents generally are more likely to struggle socially compared to children from intact families. They are more likely to be aggressive, have poorer relationships with same-age children, and have fewer close friends.¹⁷¹ Also, these children and teenagers appear to be less involved in extracurricular

activities, such as sports or music, and other enrichment programs, such as after-school classes or summer programs. This is likely due to less money to pay for such activities, less availability of parents to drive the child and attend lessons and events, more frequent moves, and visiting and custody schedules that interrupt participation in team sports and other activities.¹⁷²

Children and teenagers who experience the divorce of their parents may end up getting less parental supervision. As a result, some scholars believe that these children may be more susceptible to the influence of their peers and this increases the chances of them getting involved in deviant behavior, including drug and alcohol use and smoking.¹⁷³

One such family we know had problems with their daughter and anorexia following divorce. Along with the eating disorder, the daughter got involved with drugs. The father who had primary custody of the girl worked hard to help her through these difficult issues and used many resources such as counseling and parent-teen mediation.

Children of divorce may be less likely to learn how to cooperate, negotiate and compromise, some scholars believe.

Not surprisingly, there was ongoing conflict between the ex-spouses about the daughter. Another family we know had troubles with their son for several years after the divorce with depression and severe truancy issues. The problems associated with parenting children require much cooperation between parents, whether the parents are together or divorced.

In addition, some scholars believe that children of divorce are less likely to learn crucial social skills in the home, such as cooperation, negotiation, and compromise that are necessary for success in life.¹⁷⁴ Children exposed to high levels of conflict between their parents, both before and after a divorce, may learn to model the poor communication of their parents. Children exposed to consistent, intense conflict between parents are more likely to develop lasting expectations of conflict. This can increase the likelihood of conflict in their own personal relationships as children and even as adults, which may make forming stable, satisfying relationships as adults more challenging.¹⁷⁵

Generally, research has not found large differences in how boys and girls tend to adjust to divorce. However, it seems that boys, more than girls, tend to be more aggressive toward others and this can lead to their friends and peers rejecting them.¹⁷⁶ Boys may be somewhat more likely to act in defiant ways at home and in school; girls may be somewhat more likely to experience anxiety and depression.¹⁷⁷ A child's age when his or her parents divorce is another factor that parents worry about. But overall, research on how a child's age might increase or decrease the effects of divorce on children has not shown a consistent pattern.¹⁷⁸

Although these risks for children of divorce that researchers have found may seem overwhelming, most children and families do overcome them and adjust fairly well a few years after the initial crisis period of the family break-up. Remember, every child

responds differently to a divorce, and though divorce does put them at greater risk of emotional and social problems, these problems are not inevitable.¹⁷⁹

Given the added stresses of a family breaking up, it's not surprising that children of divorce experience more physical health problems. Children living with both biological parents have better health than children of divorce.¹⁸⁰ Children of divorce are more likely to experience injury, asthma, and headaches than children from intact families.¹⁸¹ Following divorce, children are 50% more likely to develop health problems than children in two-parent families.¹⁸²

Many of the physical symptoms experienced by children of divorce are caused by their increased anxiety, stress, and emotional insecurity. Children of divorce sometimes lose health insurance coverage. As a result of these health problems, some research has even found that children who experience a divorce will end up living fewer years.¹⁸³

C. What are the possible educational consequences of divorce?

Another area of children's lives that may be at risk as a result of divorce is academics. Children of divorced parents perform more poorly in school and have less academic success than children of intact families. However in most studies, these differences are modest rather than large.¹⁸⁴ Fewer children of divorce graduate from high school, however.¹⁸⁵ About 10% fewer children go on to college if their parents are divorced and they are about 30% less likely to receive their college degree compared to children of married parents.¹⁸⁶

The reasons for these modest differences in education are pretty straightforward. Academic performance may suffer if a child is experiencing stress or acting rebelliously as a result of parental conflict and divorce. Parents may be less able to carefully monitor the child's performance in school or help with homework because they may have less time and energy to devote to their children.¹⁸⁷ In addition, divorced parents are less able to afford private lessons, educational toys, books, home computers, and other goods for their children that may facilitate academic success. More financial strains may also force families to live in neighborhoods in which school programs are poorly financed and services are inadequate.¹⁸⁸

Also, financial strains may limit parents' ability to help their children go on to college. Many children of divorce do not set goals for college because they don't think that financial support from parents will be available.¹⁸⁹ If they do go to college, many children of divorce complain that they do not get financial help.¹⁹⁰ This was the case for one very bright and ultimately successful woman we know. She put herself through college working various jobs, eating baked potatoes and carrots, and starving herself of sleep for four years. She got a little support from her mother, who was also struggling to survive financially, and none from her estranged father. Even decades later she gets emotional recalling that lack of support and those hard times in college. She also feels that some problems with her health may be a result of poor nutrition and sleep, constant stress, and lack of parental guidance during her college years.

Again, however, remember that most of the differences in academic performance of children of divorce are modest, not large. Individual children respond differently to divorce; many may not struggle in their academic performance and achievement.

D. What are the possible religious and spiritual consequences of divorce?

Along with the emotional, social, physical, and academic risks that divorce brings to children, many parents worry about the effects on children's religious beliefs and behavior. Until recently, not much research was done on this question and there is still much to be discovered in this area. A recent national study compared young adults who grew up with divorced parents with young adults whose parents stayed married. It found that those who grew up in divorced families considered themselves spiritual about as often as those from intact families, but they were less likely to consider themselves to be religious. They attended church less often than those whose parents did not divorce, and those who did attend were less likely to be a member at that place of worship.¹⁹¹ In addition, this study found that almost twice as many children of divorce believed they could find ultimate truth without help from a religion and many felt that religion didn't address the important issues in their lives. Another interesting finding was that these children were also more than twice as likely to doubt their parents' religious beliefs.¹⁹²

One possible reason for a decline in these children's religious behavior could be the disruption in family church attendance as a result of divorce. Those in divorced families attended church less regularly and felt less encouragement from their parents to practice a religious faith.¹⁹³

In many states, including Utah, "standard visitation" in divorce cases requires that children spend every other Saturday and Sunday, the two most common days for church congregational meetings, with the non-custodial parent. This can be a struggle for couples regardless of their religious denomination. In one family we know, the children were bounced back and forth on alternate weekends as required by court order. One parent became less active in religious services and would not take the children to church on his weekends despite his ex-wife's pleading. On a positive note, we know of many divorcing couples who work out a plan for their children's religious activity. This requires them to be flexible enough to work around activities and events held by church youth groups.

Another reason for the decline in the religious activity of children of divorce could be that they feel a lack of compassion from people in the church they attend.¹⁹⁴ Also, perhaps it is more difficult for children of divorce to believe in a caring God because of the lack of trust and anger they have had toward their parents. One girl expressed her struggle this way: "Faith? Faith in what? What am I going to believe in? I believed my parents were going to be there. . . . Now what do I believe in? I don't want to deal with what-ifs or promises or dreams."¹⁹⁵ Many children felt similar feelings. In the study we mentioned earlier, one in five children of divorce agreed that it is hard to believe in a God who cares when they think about bad things that have happened in their life. Although many have a hard time with faith and belonging to a particular religion or congregation, there are also

some who turn to God for comfort. About four in ten children of divorce think of God as “the loving father or parent [they] never had in real life.”¹⁹⁶

E. What are the possible consequences of divorce for sexual behavior?

A divorce can bring more stress and loneliness for children. Children may lose the active presence of a father (or mother). They are likely to see their parents dating again and even share a home with a parent’s unmarried romantic partner. Unfortunately, research confirms that children of divorce are more likely to engage in sexual behavior at earlier ages and to become pregnant (or cause a pregnancy).¹⁹⁷ One important reason for this finding is that divorced parents are often less effective at monitoring their teenage children; poorer monitoring of teens is associated with earlier sexual activity and pregnancy.¹⁹⁸

Research also shows that the quality of parenting is important to helping teenagers avoid early sexual activity and pregnancy, even more important than whether a family is divorced or intact.¹⁹⁹ But divorce can reduce a parent’s ability to be effective. For instance, it’s important to be consistent as a parent, and divorced parents struggle with this for various reasons. Inconsistent parenting contributes to greater sexual risk for teens.²⁰⁰ Obviously, then, parents at the crossroads of divorce need to be concerned about the potential risks that divorce has for teenagers’ sexual behavior.

F. What are the possible consequences of divorce on children’s future adult romantic relationships? What are the odds of divorce for children of divorce?

Parents at the crossroads of divorce also sometimes worry that their example of divorce will hurt their children’s chances of building a healthy, stable, life-long marriage. Unfortunately, research does confirm that children who experience the divorce of their parents are at greater risk for a divorce when they eventually marry. Professor Nicholas Wolfinger, a University of Utah researcher, found that marriages in which one spouse comes from a divorced family are about twice as likely to dissolve as marriages in which neither spouse comes from a divorced family.²⁰¹ Moreover, those marriages where both the husband and wife experienced the divorce of their parents growing up are almost three times more likely to divorce than marriages where both spouses come from intact families. And children of divorce are more likely than children from intact families to marry someone who also had this same experience. These risks for divorce are even higher if the children’s parents ended a low-conflict marriage rather than a high-conflict marriage.

Why is there a greater risk for your children to divorce if you divorce? There are probably many reasons. First of all, there are differences between children whose parents divorce and children whose parents do not. For instance, they have fewer financial resources and tend to have less education. They also tend to marry younger. But even

when these differences are accounted for by researchers, there are reasons for the greater risk. One of the most important reasons that researchers have identified is that children of divorce, in general, seem to have less commitment to the ideal of lifelong marriage than children from intact marriages.²⁰² Put another way, experiencing your parents' divorce tends to undermine your faith in marital permanence so you are more likely to leave an unsatisfying relationship than hang in and try to improve it. In addition, other research suggests that children of divorce have greater difficulty trusting people, including a spouse.²⁰³ Perhaps for these reasons, children of divorce are more likely to live with a boyfriend or girlfriend before making a decision to marry. However, research shows that living together before marriage, or cohabiting, is not an effective way to increase your odds of success in marriage, and it may even increase the chances of eventual divorce.²⁰⁴

Exercises for Chapter 5

5.1: How Well Might My Children Adjust to Divorce?

It's important to consider how a divorce may affect your children. Divorce is generally a stressful experience for all children, but certain factors can make divorce harder or easier for children to deal with. As you answer these questions, keep in mind the personalities and characteristics of your children. Whether you divorce or not, answering these questions can help you better understand your children's needs at this time.

A. Children's Perspectives. In this chapter, you learned that children tend to have a more difficult time adjusting to divorce when their parents have a low-conflict marriage. On the other hand, in general, children tend to benefit from divorce when their parents had a high-conflict marriage. Either way, it is important to consider how your children experience your marriage. How do you think your children view your marriage? For each of these questions, circle the answer that best describes your situation.

	Unsure/ Not Applicable	Never (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Very Often (4)
1. My children see or hear our marital conflict.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
2. My children are aware of the topics of conflict between me and my spouse.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
3. My children get involved in our marital conflict.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
4. My children see violence between me and my spouse.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4

	Unsure/Not Applicable	Never (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Very Often (4)
5. My children act scared, hide, or leave home (or want to leave home) during our marital conflict.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
6. My spouse and I fight about our children.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
7. I (or my spouse) treat my children negatively or give them less attention during or after our marital conflict.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
8. My children are aware that my spouse and I are considering a divorce.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
9. My children see my spouse and I express affection or support for each other.	Unsure/Not Applicable	4	3	2	1	0
10. My children see my spouse and I resolving conflict in positive ways.	Unsure/Not Applicable	4	3	2	1	0

Now add up your score for these 10 questions: ____

Higher scores indicate that your children are more likely to be aware of a lot of conflict between you and your spouse while lower scores indicate that your children are less likely to be aware of conflict between you and your spouse. There is no specific score that indicates this, but if your score is greater than 25, then your children, if they are old enough, probably are aware of your marital conflict.

• Overall, how do you think your children view your marriage? How aware do you think they are of your marital problems?

B. Changes. Children may react more negatively to a divorce if it leads to other changes in their lives. Often a divorce can mean moving, less income, and less time with parents. Consider how your children’s lives would change if you divorced. Circle the answer that best describes your situation.

Would my children . . .			
1. Maintain current levels of contact with me?	Yes	No	Unsure
2. Maintain current levels of contact with my spouse?	Yes	No	Unsure
3. Maintain contact with current friends/neighbors?	Yes	No	Unsure
4. Maintain contact with my extended family?	Yes	No	Unsure
5. Maintain contact with my spouse’s extended family?	Yes	No	Unsure
6. Live in their current home?	Yes	No	Unsure
7. Start sharing a bedroom (if children currently have own)	Yes	No	Unsure
8. Attend a different daycare, school, or church?	Yes	No	Unsure
9. Participate in the same extra-curricular activities?	Yes	No	Unsure

Now, think about the following questions and write down your ideas.

- How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children’s daily schedule during the school year?

- How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children’s daily schedule when not in school?

- How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children’s weekend routines?

• How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children's activities during vacation time?

• How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect how my children celebrate holidays?

• So, overall, how would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect your children's daily lives?

C. Emotions. Every child may have an individual and even unexpected reaction to his or her parents' divorce. But given what you know about your children's emotions, reasoning, and expectations, consider how your children might feel if you were to divorce. (You may need to consider this for each child, if their reactions would be different.) Circle any of the emotions listed below that you think your children might feel:

Angry	Confused	Frustrated	Hopeful	Nervous	Scared
Annoyed	Disappointed	Guilty	Left Out	Relieved	Surprised
Betrayed	Excited	Happy	Lonely	Sad	Worried

• What other emotions might your children feel?

- Why do you think your children would feel these emotions?

D. Resilience. As you learned in this chapter, children who are more flexible or adaptive and who have better social skills generally have an easier time adjusting to divorce. Think about the following questions and write down your ideas:

- How flexible or adaptable are your children? Do they deal fairly easily with change and different situations or do those things tend to upset them? Are they usually secure or insecure? (You may need to think about this separately for each child.)

- Do your children have good social skills or do they struggle with relationships with other children and adults? Is getting along with others easy for them or hard? Do they fit in when they are in groups or do they struggle in groups? (You may need to think about this separately for each child.)

E. Your parenting. Perhaps the most important element in how well your children might adapt to divorce is the quality of the parenting you provide them during the difficult changes of a divorce. The stresses of divorce and your own emotions can affect your parenting. Of course, maybe you are already feeling greater stress and emotions due to challenges you are facing in your marriage. Still, think about the following questions.

- Would you be more or less stressed if you got a divorce? How would stress affect your ability to be a good parent? Do you think you might be harsher in disciplining your children? More lenient or soft? How could you keep stress from making you less effective as a parent? Write your thoughts here:

• What aspects of parenting would change if you got a divorce? For instance, are there things your spouse usually does as a parent that you would need to take on? How would a divorce affect the amount of time and attention you give your children? Write down your thoughts here:

• How might a divorce affect the way you see and treat your children? For instance, would you need your children to be more mature and independent? Would your children need to take on more responsibilities in the home or be alone in the home more often? Would you need your children to be an emotional support to you? (Sometimes after a divorce, parents go to their children for support or sympathy or even advice. While a little of this is understandable, too much of this can place children in the uncomfortable role of acting like a parent to their parent.) Write down your thoughts here:

• Usually, the amount of time parents can care directly for their children decreases after a divorce. A divorce often requires different circumstances for caring for children, such as daycare, family care, more babysitting, etc. What kind of changes would you anticipate for caring for your children when you are not able to be there? How do you think your children will react to such changes?

- Children do better after divorce if their parents can cooperate with each other and hold down their anger. How well do you think you could cooperate and be civil with your spouse if you got a divorce? Would you be able to speak positively about your ex-spouse in front of your children? Would you feel good if your children wanted to spend a lot of time with your ex-spouse and openly expressed love for him or her? Write down your thoughts here:

F. Putting it together. Now that you've considered these different issues—how your children might feel about your current marriage and how aware they may be of your marital problems, how your children's daily lives might change because of divorce, the emotions your children might feel if you divorce, the personal characteristics of your children that may affect how well they adjust to a divorce, and how a divorce might affect your parenting—how well do you think your children would adjust to a divorce? Write your thoughts here:
