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CREATIVE PARENTING

Living in a Divided World

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Even in the best divorces, kids live divided lives in which they struggle to understand their parents' behaviors, negotiate tangled family systems, and develop values and beliefs," says Elizabeth Marquardt, a scholar and researcher with the Institute for American Values. These children also are more apt to struggle with loss, isolation, loneliness, and suffering.

More than one million children experience the divorce of their parents every year. While most adults feel guilty and attempt to make life easier for their children, most children do not fare well. Marquardt found that children of divorced parents are more apt than those living in intact families to feel divided between two homes with different values. They are asked to keep secrets about the different households and are left without clear guidance on what is right and what is wrong. They turn, instead, to friends and siblings.

These children go from living in one world that seemed safe to them, to going back and forth between two homes that often feel like polar

opposites. The kids must do what their parents would have done for them: develop a clear view of what to think, what to believe, and how to behave, especially in the moral and spiritual realms. Marquardt suggests it becomes the child's job to synthesize these two worlds. Unfortunately, many suffer emotional scars that last a lifetime and have trouble with their own intimate relationships as adults.

Marquardt's findings parallel the concerns of long-time researcher Judith Wallerstein.

She says, "These children have a sense of living in two different worlds. They grow up with a difficulty in feeling whole." It's not to say that all children don't experience stress and loss. In intact families, parents are ill, they die, they are alcoholic, they have emotional problems, they move, they lose jobs, they are poor. But that doesn't diminish the pain children feel when their parents get divorced.

So how can adults ease the pain? One suggestion is to not silence the hurt. Be a listening ear to a child. As they tell their story, listen and accept. Children will reveal themselves differently at different stages. Just because an eight-year-old shared his pain at eight, it doesn't mean he doesn't need to talk to someone when he is 10 years old. Once is not enough! Let them know that you will always be in their life. Find a text or an inspirational thought that you can share to help sustain them. Make a poster or a bookmark with the text or thought on it and give it to them. Remind them of this hope whenever you talk with them.

If you are a divorced or divorcing parent, recognize that your own pain and guilt can cloud your thoughts, and that your child may be suffering more than you realize. If your child is living in a divided world, have some guidelines that both parents follow. This is easier said than done, but it is possible! Don't ask your child to be a messenger between the two households, and don't ask your child to be a reporter. Find other peers to share your pain with—do not put that responsibility on your child. Remember that when you say critical things about your child's other parent, it is like an arrow in your child's heart.

Keep in mind that your child is trustworthy, intelligent, and more able to succeed in this divided world if you find healing for yourself and put your trust in a God who can sustain each of you.

