



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Children of Divorce-Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Arch Hart

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Dr. James Dobson: Hello everyone, you're listening to Family Talk, a radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson and thank you for joining us for this program.

Roger Marsh: Hello everyone, and welcome to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Today, we're going to share a classic conversation between our own Dr. Dobson and psychologist and author, Dr. Arch Hart. They will be discussing the unavoidable impact that divorce has on our children. Dr. Archibald Hart is Dean Emeritus and Professor Emeritus at the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, where he served from 1973 until 2016. He was trained as a clinical psychologist in his native, South Africa. He's the author of 24 books, and is best known for his research on the hazards of ministry, stress, divorce, and anxiety. Dr. Hart is actually the father of author and therapist, Dr. Sharon May, who is also a frequent guest here on Family Talk. Being a child of divorce himself, Dr. Hart knows firsthand that divorce leaves an indelible mark on children. Today, he and Dr. Dobson will offer advice to divorced parents on how they can help their kids walk through this very difficult situation. It can certainly have a long term impact on a young person's life. Let's listen now to their compassionate and helpful conversation.

Dr. James Dobson: Your first visit to this ministry occurred in 1982.

Dr. Arch Hart: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And you don't have any idea what we talked about that day, do you?

Dr. Arch Hart: I don't, I must confess. I don't.

Dr. James Dobson: We talked about the cancer of resentment.

Dr. Arch Hart: Oh, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And, that whole phenomenon of what cancer does, not to the person you resent, but to the resenter.

Dr. Arch Hart: Yeah. It's the boomerang that comes back and hurts you.

Dr. James Dobson: It is, and there was a quote that you gave us that day that I've been using ever since and it has such meaning, you said, "Forgiveness is giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me."

Dr. Arch Hart: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And that's...

Dr. Arch Hart: You've got a good memory.

Dr. James Dobson: That's good stuff. And it's very relevant to what we're going to talk about today because divorce oozes with resentment, doesn't it?

Dr. Arch Hart: Absolutely. Resentment and even divorces that begin out as friendly divorces, about one third of them turn nasty, and the level of resentment conflict just escalates.

Dr. James Dobson: There's always a ripping and tearing of flesh and the children get caught up in.

Dr. Arch Hart: As always. The victims of divorce are the children, not the parents. They are the children.

Dr. James Dobson: The title of your book again is *Helping Children Survive Divorce*. The word survive is a strong word there. Do you really mean that?

Dr. Arch Hart: It is strong word.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you really mean that? Is it a matter of survival?

Dr. Arch Hart: I mean that. It is a matter of survival. I write the book out of my own personal experience. In that, my parents divorced when I was 12 years of age. I know it first hand, which is more than a lot of people can say.

Dr. James Dobson: How much do you remember about that?

Dr. Arch Hart: Vividly, everything. I can remember vividly the day my mother walked into the room and said, "Pack your things we're leaving."

Dr. James Dobson: Did you have any clue that it was coming?

Dr. Arch Hart: No. I knew that the marriage was conflicted for years. They'd been fighting and arguing. I felt a relief when the school holiday time came and I could go and be with my grandparents who were wonderful Christian people. And for that period of time, there was peace in my life. And then we'd come back to the

home, conflicted tents and so forth. Despite all of that, the last thing I wanted was for my parents to separate.

Dr. James Dobson: A lot of tears at that time?

Dr. Arch Hart: I cried a lot. Difficult at first. You hold it in. My father didn't respect boys who cried. So, you get the message, "Don't be a sissy. Toughen up, toughen up a little bit. This is life." And so, you internalize those tears. I think there's a lot of internal crying. Not all of us cry outwardly, we cry inwardly.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you blame one of the parents over the other?

Dr. Arch Hart: I write about this in the book, because, I think, parents need to understand that what often happens is that children turn and blame the innocent parent. I turned to my mother and took my anger out on her.

Dr. James Dobson: But it was really your father.

Dr. Arch Hart: Of course, it was my father. I knew that. But, part of it is I think the child's fear. You turn to the safest parent to project your anger, to take out your feelings. And, I turned on her and I blamed...I didn't blame her. I took my anger out on her.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, going back to that word, survival, was it a matter of survival for you? What happened?

Dr. Arch Hart: I didn't. I did not survive very well, which is why I eventually got to writing this book, because, first of all, I think that no child is the same after divorce, as they would have been if no divorce had occurred. There's a lot you can do to make things better than they would otherwise be, but it is a matter of surviving. And, I certainly don't want to send the message that, well, if your parents' divorce, you are doomed. That's not my message. My message is that, if divorce is inevitable and it's going to happen anyway, then, there is a lot you can do to help your children survive and minimize the damage.

Dr. James Dobson: In medicine, we talk often about the natural history of the disease. In other words, there is a sequence of events that unless you intercede in some way, you can expect this to happen. The natural history of divorce for children is bad news.

Dr. Arch Hart: Is bad news. No doubt about it. All the research.

Dr. James Dobson: You talk, in fact, about the research in your book, especially by Dr. Judith Wallerstein, who is the guru of this field. She's done more research than anybody else.

Dr. Arch Hart: And she has stood up to critics left, right, and center in a way that is quite admirable.

Dr. James Dobson: What she has concluded from all this research, which I hope, if there are parents out there who are thinking about getting a divorce and the situation is tolerable at all, I hope you'll weigh this, that those children who go through this and are in such pain in the beginning are actually hurting worse five years later than they were at the time of the divorce.

Dr. Arch Hart: That's the research evidence. And the evidence is clear. There's nothing good that comes out of divorce.

Dr. James Dobson: It does not go away. And it doesn't get better unless you work on it.

Dr. Arch Hart: Unless you intervene, you have to do something. It's like, the medical analysis is a good one. That disease has a process, and you have to intervene if you want to have a good outcome.

Dr. James Dobson: Arch, you were 12 when this happened in your family. That's a terrible time for divorce to occur.

Dr. Arch Hart: It's the worst time. And the research shows very clearly that up around puberty starting from age about 10 to age 13 or 14 is the worst time. That's when the maximum damage takes place.

Dr. James Dobson: All those changes are going on inside of you.

Dr. Arch Hart: I think that there are two reasons. First of all, it's the age at which you are maximally aware of what's going on. Younger than that, you really don't know what's going on. You're aware there is something happening, but you go along for the ride. But, at about that point, you are fully aware, but you are also minimally equipped to deal with it. As children get older and experience divorce, they have skills, they got their own life looming ahead of them. They go off to college. They get on with their life at 12, 13. Where do you go? You're trapped.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, let's talk a little bit about how to make it easier. It's never going to be easy. It's like any other, well, again, the analogy to a disease process. It's never easy to have measles or mumps or cancer or any other disease, but there are things that are done to help under those circumstances. Let's talk about what will help. Begin with, how in the world you tell a child, let's say five or older, that this has occurred? Did your folks handle it wisely with you?

Dr. Arch Hart: No. They did not tell me what was going on behind the scenes. They thought they were protecting me. And I think, this is the biggest mistake parents can make, to think that you're protecting your children by not telling them what's going on. I have come to the conclusion that the best thing parents can do is be honest with their children. I think, we are created in a way where we deal with

reality better than we do with our imagination. And so lying awake at night as a young child, playing out in my mind, different scenarios that is anxiety producing, such fear producing, anxiety producing, and anxiety is bad. There's nothing good about anxiety. I would rather have been fearful knowing what was happening than to have to put up with the anxiety.

Dr. James Dobson: And now, let's go back to that word resentment again. How does a parent who resents the husband or wife, the spouse, convey to a child what has happened without spilling all of that poison on the child?

Dr. Arch Hart: And that's the problem. You get to express your resentment toward the partner at the child. The partner may already have gone split, ran off, and you're left there. And the only person you can express that to is your child. And so, therefore, you need to not take it out on the child.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's get a highly specific situation. Cause we're talking to people who are there. Let's suppose that the husband has ran off with another woman and the wife and the mother is left to explain this to the child. I talked to somebody just the other day where this man had been the pillar of the church. He was deeply committed to the Lord. He loved his family, gave time to his family and went a little crazy. We've all seen that. He just got infatuated with this woman. And now, he won't have anything to do with his own children. He treats his, who is now his ex-wife like dirt. How does that woman deal with this with the children? Daddy never comes around. He doesn't show any kind of love to them anymore. And he's gone.

Dr. Arch Hart: Well, you have to be honest. Don't make excuses for the other partner. It's just a matter of saying, "Darling, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your daddy has left us, doesn't want to live with us. Now, I don't want you ..." And I think this is the hard part to say to your child. "I don't want you to hold this against your daddy or your mommy. I don't want this to come between the two of you. And I'm going to do everything I can to get healing for the hurt I'm experiencing."

Dr. James Dobson: We need to pray for daddy.

Dr. Arch Hart: "And we need to pray for daddy." You got to do the Christian thing, Jim. That's what you've got to do. There is no other way.

Dr. James Dobson: Boy, that's tough. When you're dying inside yourself.

Dr. Arch Hart: It is tough when you're dying inside. And maybe, the best thing you can do at that point is just to state the fact and then pull back and go and get to have some help for yourself because the one factor above all other factors that minimizes the damage that divorce has on children is when the parents get healing for themselves. Heal your own resentment. Heal the conflict between the two of you and you give your child the gift of healing.

Dr. James Dobson: It's very difficult to provide first aid for a child when you're bleeding yourself.

Dr. Arch Hart: That's right. And, not just bleeding, but when your bleeding is hurting the child, because when a young child sees how mummy's devastated or daddy. Let's remember, this is not only...it goes both ways. But when the little child is looking at the parent who has been abandoned and sees that hurt, that child will often feel to blame for that. Maybe, I was the one who caused that.

Dr. James Dobson: That often occurs, doesn't it? You've got to head that off. How do you do it?

Dr. Arch Hart: It is very common. And Jim, I can tell you that was the first thought in my mind, I am to blame something I did. I've not been the good child I should be.

Dr. James Dobson: You really remember thinking those thoughts and nobody helped you?

Dr. Arch Hart: And I lie awake at night trying to think, what did I do? What did I do? And of course, you can't come up with anything. It's there. You think, "Well, maybe, I'm to blame for this."

Dr. James Dobson: People have to understand that that is the self-centeredness of childhood. I heard a story the other day of a child who, I think three years of age, was sitting on the toilet when an earthquake hit in Southern California. And this kid looked at his mother and said, "What did I do, mommy?" You naturally think everything's your fault and your responsibility and especially when a family breaks up, it goes right straight to the core of the child, doesn't it?

Dr. Arch Hart: The second major thing that I think a parent must keep in mind, the parent who's left now with the children and having to deal with this abandonment and so forth. It's never planned, you see. I mean, these things are spontaneous, usually. The second most important thing is to realize that this is such a...The departure of the other parent is so dramatic for the child. Change as little else as you possibly can. The first reaction of the rejected spouse is, "I'm packing up, we're moving. We're going back to grandma's. We're going back East. We're going back Timbuktu," whatever.

Dr. James Dobson: That rips loose all friends, everything familiar, the neighborhood, the bed, the clock, everything changes.

Dr. Arch Hart: The child needs to adjust to this one very significant departure. Minimize other change to cool it. Why do they do that? "Well, I'm going to take the child so that if you want to have access to the child, I'm going to punish you." And that is the worst thing you can do. Change as little as you possibly can.

Dr. James Dobson: Sometimes that's done for financial reasons, isn't it? "I'm going back and live with my folks. I can't afford to leave alone now."

Dr. Arch Hart: It doesn't have to be done tomorrow. It's the urgency. It's the suddenness with it. Prepare the way, sit down and do some planning now. The impulsive sudden decisions will always be wrong and the child will suffer because of that.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, let's talk the various emotions that show up in children at this time. How do you recognize and deal with anger in the child? The one who is, obviously, a really holding somebody responsible for this, maybe the wrong parent, how do you ventilate that anger? There are those in our profession who will say that you allow that child to say, "I hate you" and throw things in scream and throw temper tantrums and so on. That's not the answer.

Dr. Arch Hart: I do not believe in that at all. I am very clear on this point as a psychologist, anger is to be talked about not acted out. It has to be talked about. It doesn't matter how young the child is. The child needs to talk about the anger. The biggest mistake parents can make, and often they feel guilty, you see. The poor child, look at how the child is suffering. So, I'm going to leave in bash, break the television set, kick the dog. Because most people who have picked up on that secular idea, that anger should be ventilated, acted out.

Dr. James Dobson: It actually creates more anger. The crazy thing is that it doesn't ventilate it.

Dr. Arch Hart: What you're doing is teaching the child how to act angrily. There is no research evidence whatsoever, and there's been some very excellent work done by a psychologist from Boston in this area that shows that ventilating or rehearsing anger relieves the anger, it only creates more.

Dr. James Dobson: So, you sit down and talk.

You've got to sit down with a child, no matter how young needs to talk. Maybe a very young child may draw some pictures for you. "How do you feel about daddy and mommy?" "Draw a picture of me and daddy." Get the child to express the feelings. Parents don't like doing that. They don't like doing that because, it only stirs up their own hurt. It only stirs up their own hurt.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. Let's role play a little bit. I'm six years old, and you're my dad and our mom has gone. Your wife has gone, and you're seeing the signs of anger in me. And, I'm saying you, "Daddy, I'm mad at my mother. She doesn't call me. She doesn't come see me anymore. I think I hate my mother."

Dr. Arch Hart: Unfortunately, he doesn't even say that. What he says is, "Oh, my tummy hurts. I don't want to go to school today." And so, let's talk about it. I mean, what are you feeling then? And often to young children, as opposed to the 12 or 13 year old, who might say, "Oh, I'm so mad and I'm so angry." To the six year old, you might have to say, "Tell me how you're feeling. How do you feel about me or your daddy right now?" And, sometimes, you even have to suggest a vocabulary. They don't have the labels for these feelings yet. "And so, you feel angry? You feel like you want to break things?" And then, the child gets in touch

with the emotion. And while it might feel like it's more painful at that moment, in the long run, and this is the important point to emphasize. It's long-term benefits that you're looking for, not the short-term. And sometimes, short term intensified pain is the best solution for the long-term relief.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. Bring the Lord into that conversation. Now, how do you help that child learn to lean on the Lord and depend on Him in a moment like that?

Dr. Arch Hart And because many children have prayed, they they'd been praying for the conflict. I prayed. I lay at night and I prayed and prayed. And then, when finally, they split, where's God? And so, there's a crisis of faith, even as six-year-old, a crisis of faith. And, the parent has to model for the child, not just faith that everything will come right, but faith to believe that we can get through this, that we can get over our hurt, that that the pain will get better one day. We're going to hurt now, and we're going to get worse before it gets better. But, God is with us by our teaching and by our actions and by our attitude and by our own display of spiritual behavior. Even a four year or three year old child can benefit from that.

Dr. James Dobson: One of the surprising things in your book that I know is valid from other research is that, when a child becomes super sweet and super cooperative and becomes a little angel, beware. That's not a good sign. People have a hard time understanding that, but it's true.

Dr. Arch Hart: That's right. We call it reaction formation. And often little Mary, five-year-old Mary, will suddenly become the sweetest, kindest child. Will wait on you. Will try to anticipate your needs. It's a danger signal.

Dr. James Dobson: She's taking on the responsibility to cheer you up, to help mom out. And that's too much to put on your kid.

Dr. Arch Hart: Exactly. That's too much to put on a little child. That little child should not be doing that and trying to relieve your pain, the child will pay for that. Because they take upon themselves your pain, and they shouldn't have to bear such a burden.

Dr. James Dobson: At what point, Arch, do you seek professional help for a child?

Dr. Arch Hart: That's a difficult question because if you seek professional help too soon, you may send the message to the child, "There's something wrong with you." I think, one should always get help for oneself first because I'm a strong believer that a good, healthy parent is the best therapist a child could have.

Dr. James Dobson: You what that reminds me of? When you fly on an airplane and they describe emergency procedures and they say the oxygen falls, they always tell you to put your own mask on before you put the mask on the child. Take care of yourself first.

Dr. Arch Hart: Exactly. It seems selfish, doesn't it? But, it's not selfish. The point is that, you take care of yourself first and you, then, are in the best position to help your child. But there comes a time when a child is acting out so severely, harming itself, or particularly, and I think this is what I would like to underscore today, that when they are signs of depression in the child, you should seek professional help.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. We've got two or three minutes left. Tell us what those signs are.

Dr. Arch Hart: The children don't show depression the same way as adults. What happens is that, often they start to somaticize, hurting, usually the stomach, headache, pain, generally. They withdraw. They want to be by themselves. They don't want to be with their friends. They'll socially withdraw. They become isolated. Often, anger is a mask for depression. They want to beat you, and the child comes up in fists...little fists...

Dr. James. Dobson: Cruelty to animals is a sure tip off.

Dr. Arch Hart: And then they take it out... And there's a sadness. So, they tend to cry a lot. And these are the signs of depression. And, we now believe that later, depression proneness has its origin in these painful episodes of early childhood. And divorce, more than any other life experience, can set you up for serious problems of depression later in life.

Dr. James Dobson: What does the counselor or psychologist do when that eight-year-old comes in? What goes on there?

Dr. Arch Hart: Mostly, it is a grief counseling. It's reactive...

Dr. James Dobson: Helping them talk through the loss.

Dr. Arch Hart: Talk through the loss, confront the loss, symbolize the loss. And so, when draws pictures a lot, one talks emotional feelings a lot, it's a process. You try to disabuse the child of fantasizing that all will come right again. Mommy and daddy will get back together again. It's wonderful when it does happen. And, those miracles do happen and happen often. But, I don't think it helps a child to hold out the hopes that that will happen. It just perpetuates the depression.

Dr. James Dobson: One of my favorite comedians through the years, Jonathan Winters. I heard him say one time in a moment of real honesty, he was not trying to be funny. He said that when he was a child, his mother and father got a divorce and he talked about how painful it was for him, that it just wounded him so deeply. And it was not common in those days. And he said that he put on a big front and he fought with the other kids and they never knew. But he said, "When nobody was looking, I went out behind a tree somewhere and cried." And he said, "All my humor is a response to sorrow."

Dr. Arch Hart: That's right. And I think, that goes beyond him. I think, most good comedians will say, there's a deep melancholy from which my...

Dr. James Dobson: Arch, we're just getting started. Let's proceed tomorrow. We're talking about Dr. Archibald Hart's book, *Helping Children Survive Divorce: What to Expect, How to Help*. And there are an awful lot of parents out there that need this book and need this information. And we're going to provide a little more of it next time. Thanks for being our guest. We'll pick up right here, next time around.

Dr. Arch Hart: My pleasure. Thank you, Jim.

Roger Marsh: Well, you just heard day one of Dr. Dobson's conversation with Dr. Arch Hart on the topic of helping children survive divorce here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. The negative effect and wounding that divorce has on the emotional well-being of a child is undeniable. And as Dr. Dobson pointed out, no child is immune to those effects. However, if divorce is unavoidable, parents have to be active in helping their children process and cope. If you'd like to learn more about Dr. Arch Hart, his books, and his work in psychology, you can find that and more on our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. Just type in drjamesdobson.org/broadcast and it'll take you right there. Of course, you can always call us at any time. We are here to answer your questions about the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. We'll be happy to pray with you, and we'll suggest a resource here from Family Talk, as well. Our number is (877) 732-6825. That's (877) 732-6825. Thanks so much for joining us today here on Family Talk and your commitment to pray and support our ministry. I'm Roger Marsh. Join us again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. Have a blessed day.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.