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Broadcast: Children of Divorce-Part 2

Guest(s): Dr. Arch Hart

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh and Family Talk is a division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Divorce is painful for everyone involved; I can speak from experience on that. Regardless of the circumstances, grief cannot be avoided when a married couple decides to separate. Often, however, the people who sustain perhaps the most devastating and lasting wounds, are the children of the divorced couple. Today, we're going to be sharing with you a classic conversation between Dr. Dobson and psychologist and author, Dr. Arch Hart, about the impact that divorce has on children. Dr. Archibald Hart is Dean Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, where he taught and served from 1973 until 2016. Wow, 43 years, that is quite an accomplishment. And to think of all the young theologians he taught and inspired along the way, too. Man, that's impressive.

Arch Hart was trained as a clinical psychologist in his native country of 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. And by the way, Dr. Hart's daughter, Dr. Sharon May, is also an author and a frequent guest here on the Family Talk broadcast. Dr. Dobson and Dr. Hart were joined by a large group of college students who were in attendance. And a few of those students were asked to participate and they asked Dr. Hart some well thought out questions. So, you'll hear that today as well. Let's listen now to today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Arch, to set up our topic again today, I want to go back to the mid-eighties when Shirley and I were on a vacation. In fact, we'd been traveling for three weeks, had our kids with us and wound up in Washington, DC. And we were just killing time and enjoying the last two days there. We were at the end of the clean clothes and all that sort of thing that happens on a trip like that. And I heard that there was a conference at the White House on the subject of divorce and I thought that would be interesting. Shirley wanted to go shopping, and so I said, "I'm going to see if I can get into this conference." And I got in, there were about



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250 people over in the old executive office building right next door, within the compound of the White House.

So, I got in there and I was sitting there at the back and Leilani Watt, who was the wife of the then Secretary of Interior, Jim Watt, was sitting in front of me and we've been friends for a while. And she leaned back to me and said, "I don't think they've been fair to you." And I said, "Really?" I said, "Who hadn't been fair to me?" And she said, "The planners of this conference." I said, "Why not?" She said, "I don't think they gave you enough time." I said, "Time to what?" And she said, "Time to speak. You're speaking. You're the main speaker." They had forgotten to tell me I was the main speaker at this conference.

Dr. Arch Hart: And you were there accidentally.

Dr. James Dobson: I was there just because I happened to be there and they forgot to tell me. And man, my mind was going buzz. I was trying thinking of what, and at that moment, the White House staffer came, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Would you come to the platform?" I'm walking to the platform. I got 250 people there and I've got to speak. And they introduced me. Who knows what I said that day? I have no-

Dr. Arch Hart: You remember what I said in '82?

Dr. James Dobson: I don't remember what I said. All I remember is I had a blue suit on with brown socks, that's what I remember, because everything was dirty. And then the other speaker that morning came to speak and he had a profound impact on me. It was Dr. Armand Nicholi from Harvard University, wonderful psychiatrist who talked about divorce that day. And I will never forget the things that he said. In fact, I came home and I wrote it down. And in my December 1984 letter, I described what he said that day. Now this is perhaps based on what is now old information, but it's still valid.

Let me read two paragraphs from that letter. "Dr. Nicholi presented the latest studies conducted on the subject of parenting, especially as it contributes to mental health in children, the findings were startling. It is now known that emotional development in children is directly related to the presence of a warm, nurturing, sustained, and continuous interaction with both parents. Anything that interferes with that vital relationship with either parent can have lasting consequences for the child.



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Consider the effects of divorce, for example. One landmark study revealed that 90% of children from divorced homes suffered from an acute sense of shock, when the separation occurred, including profound grieving, and irrational fears. 50% reported feeling rejected and abandoned, and indeed half the fathers never came to see their children three years after the divorce. One third of the boys and girls feared abandonment by the remaining parent, and 66% experienced yearning for the absent parent with an intensity that researchers described as overwhelming. Most significantly, 37% of the children were even more unhappy and dissatisfied five years after the divorce than they had been at 18 months. In other words, time did not heal their wounds. In summary, Dr. Nicholi said, "Divorce brings such intense loneliness to children, that it's pain is difficult to describe or even to contemplate." Do you agree completely with what he says?

Dr. Arch Hart: Absolutely. I could have written those words-

Dr. James Dobson: In fact, you did in your book, when helping children survive divorce.

Dr. Arch Hart: Yeah, that's it. And unless you've been through it, you do not know, you cannot even grasp the depth of the hurt, the fear, the insecurities, the anxiety, and the deeper damage to your self-esteem particularly, it's remarkable.

Dr. James Dobson: You and I were talking in my office before we came down here. You made a very interesting statement that you feel, and I believe I agree with you, that divorce after a relationship has been established, is actually more damaging to a child than the death of a parent.

Dr. Arch Hart: Yes. I would say that, and I have been through the experience now in our own family. So, I know it firsthand.

Dr. James Dobson: Your grandchild lost his father.

Dr. Arch Hart: Two of my grandson's lost their father-

Dr. James Dobson: In an accident.

Dr. Arch Hart: He was killed in an automobile accident. He was a school teacher in a very famous Los Angeles school. And one day, midday, he was going to school to teach, he had the afternoon-



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- Dr. James Dobson: Classes.
- Dr. Arch Hart: ... activities to take care of and at midday, just two miles from his home on the freeway, a truck dropped a crate in the road. He swerved to miss it, left the road, hit a tree. And we didn't know it had happened until nearly 10 o'clock that night. When we went down to USC Trauma Center, you know the-
- Dr. James Dobson: I do.
- Dr. Arch Hart: You know the place I'm talking about and walked through the mangled people in there, looking for Richard, because they didn't define his identity. It was in the trunk of his car. So, they had him as a John Doe and he only had a few hours to live.
- Dr. James Dobson: What were the ages of his children?
- Dr. Arch Hart: They were 10 and 12. But you see, my oldest grandson... That's the age my parents got divorced, so I have a very-
- Dr. James Dobson: Comparison.
- Dr. Arch Hart: ... end of one personal study here between how the divorce of my parents impacted me versus how the death of his daddy impacted him. And I can tell you, death of a parent, bad as that is, I'm not wanting to minimize that at all, pales in significance to the impact that divorce has on a child.
- Dr. James Dobson: Explain why.
- Dr. Arch Hart: Death is final. I had to sit with my two grandsons the next morning. They were at our house while we went looking for their daddy-
- Dr. James Dobson: Very tender moment, I'm sure.
- Dr. Arch Hart: I'll never forget it. To sit them down and look into their eyes and tell them, "Your daddy died last night." And the shock, the disbelief, and then the crying and the screaming, and you've got to let them just vent it. Now in the death of a parent, what happens is that the emotional reaction is far greater. It's much more of a vesuvius, intense thing. Whereas in divorce, the emotions creep up on you a little bit more insidiously-



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- Dr. James Dobson: They're stuffed down.
- Dr. Arch Hart: It's stuffed down. It's not as final as death. Divorce is only the beginning of the problems. You have conflict now. Like before divorce, it was nothing compared to what it is now, as parents begin to fight over the kids and hassle over support and financial matters. Your daddy, if he leaves you, he goes away, he may not come and visit you for three years, but he's there somewhere. And so, at night, you're fantasizing, you're lying awake wondering, "Where's my dad? Why has he abandoned me?" The first chapter of my book is called, "Divorced at 12," because I was divorced, not just my mother. I was abandoned.
- Dr. James Dobson: Before we get back to children Arch, I want to ask you to do something you may not have expected me to do. But we're talking to husbands and wives out there who are not happy in marriage, and there's a lot of conflict and their personalities don't mesh like they should've, and maybe the marriage has never been very happy. And I don't want to add to the pain of those people by dumping a load of guilt on them, but talk to them a little bit about their children and about what divorce will mean for them as they're facing this decision as to whether to go on together or not.
- Dr. Arch Hart: Well, the first thing I would say is that divorce doesn't solve every marital problem. Lots of people get divorced and they're worse off afterwards, there's no doubt about that. The evidence is that divorce damages adults, as well as children.
- Dr. James Dobson: The families don't divorce. You've always got the same grandparents for the grandkids and there's linkage there.
- Dr. Arch Hart: I would plead with parents whose marriage is not going well right now, and every marriage goes through a bad season. I mean, just go live long enough, you'll know, I don't know of any marriage that hasn't gone through a bad time. But one has to look, and this is the mistake, I think, that we have made seeing the need for our own self-fulfillment in marriage. We've got to look beyond that. We've got to look at the interests of our children. And I would at least plead with us. And I know, don't misunderstand me, but I would at least say to parents whose children are at that critical stage, say 14 or under, if at all possible, delay your divorce. Now in delaying it, you may find that you've worked out a marriage-



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- Dr. James Dobson: And seek professional help and-
- Dr. Arch Hart: And get some counseling, get some help for it. But whatever else, I mean, I'm just talking bottom line here, whatever else you do, try to delay the divorce. To that, your children get to a slightly older stage of life, where they have the skills, the ability to be able to make the adjustments with less pain.
- Dr. James Dobson: Another thing that the rest of us need to do is to be very sensitive to those youngsters who have lost a mother or father through divorce or death. You have a story of your grandchild on Father's Day, and what happened at school. This is hard to believe.
- Dr. Arch Hart: Well, and it's not only death, but in divorce also, schools, teachers, friends, even family members are not always sensitive. But what happened with my younger grandson, the 10-year-old who'd lost his daddy, and who I think has emotionally suffered more than the older one, but the accident happened in April. And as you know, in June, Father's Day comes up. And so, a couple of weeks before Father's Day, the teacher arranges for the class to start to prepare writing a card or preparing a card for their fathers. Without any regard to the hurt, the pain that caused my grandson-
- Dr. James Dobson: Never came and helped-
- Dr. Arch Hart: Never came and so a day or two later, he wouldn't go to school and we couldn't figure out why he wouldn't go to school. When a child that age hurts, they don't want to tell you what's hurting. Maybe they don't want to make it conscious or something. But it took quite a little bit of pushing him before he told us that in the classroom right now, in this particular class period, that all the kids are sitting, designing and preparing a card and stuff for their fathers. What's he supposed to do? And so, my daughter finally went and talked to the teacher and they made arrangements for him to skip that class, and so have some other activity to go on, but it was a reminder that the system and including churches, are not always sympathetic. This could be also true for a divorce child, whose parent has left.
- Dr. James Dobson: A lot of the help in your book, which is entitled, *Helping Children Survive Divorce*, involves getting behind the eyes of the child and meeting whatever needs are there, whatever he or she is feeling and not telling you about and responding appropriately to those kinds of moments.



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- Dr. Arch Hart: Yes. You've got to understand your child and what the child is feeling, and that's difficult. I'm not suggesting it's easy. You've got all this pain of your own to take care of. How are you going to set that aside? But you've got to do that. And that's why you've got to find some way you can deal with your own pain so that you can be free then to provide an atmosphere for your child.
- Dr. James Dobson: Well, I want to reserve the rest of the program, Arch for the students who are around us, and we have a microphone set up here and we're going to invite them to come now and ask whatever questions they wish from yesterday's program, and of course what we've done today. So, whoever's got the courage to start, join us there, give us your name and what school you're from, the whole group.
- Dr. Arch Hart: Everyone stand.
- Dr. James Dobson: We've got nearly 40 young people here. So, we're going to have a hard time getting this on the air, but we'll take as many as we can, right here.
- Jessica Anderson: I'm Jessica Anderson from Taylor University. And my question is what are some specific things that an outsider, someone who is not a family member, can do to help minimize the effects of divorce of children who've been through a divorce?
- Dr. Arch Hart: Right. That's a wonderful question there, because I think friends, family members, can rally around and help a family going through divorce. Some of the things you can do with teenage boys or girls, for example, now one of the parents isn't there to do certain things, say the father isn't there, you can help offer to take the child to some games, to some activities. And particularly with my grandsons, this has been most, most helpful in that younger people have given time and sacrificially spent time with our boys. And that's been a wonderfully healing thing for them.
- Dr. James Dobson: Arch, if you just look through scripture, the Lord obviously has a very tender place in his heart for the fatherless child and the widow. And I assume that applies to divorce as well.
- Dr. Arch Hart: That applies to divorce, absolutely. Everything that applies to any loss of a father, I think these principles would apply.



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- Dr. James Dobson: I think we in the church, it's very easy to criticize the church. They're the whipping boy for everything that is going wrong in society, and it's not fair, but we have been reluctant to help the single parent deal with this. You've got a mother struggling to earn a living and do all this stuff and come home and take care of those kids. There's no dad in the home. Men, go pick up those kids and take them to a football game, teach them to throw a ball, show them what a man is all about.
- Dr. Arch Hart: And another need they have is now that there's a single parent taking care of the children, they need babysitters. They need someone to go and watch the children, when mommy goes to the doctor for an appointment. Someone's got to watch those kids.
- Dr. James Dobson: Change the oil in her car, fix the roof.
- Dr. Arch Hart: All sorts of ways you can be helpful.
- Student 2: On yesterday's broadcast, you mentioned the importance of parents being honest with their children. My question is in cases such as infidelity or an addiction or something like that, how much should the parents really tell their children?
- Dr. Arch Hart: Good question. Thank you for asking that. I insist that one should be honest, but I don't think that one can be honest in matters like that and be fair always. You've got to tailor the information to the age of the child. A five-year-old doesn't understand about infidelity, doesn't understand it. Maybe that the explanation has to be delayed for a later time. If a child is older, then I think you should ask your spouse, not you, to tell your child. Put the responsibility back where it belongs. That's what triangulation is all about, if you've studied anything about systems theory. The principle is put the responsibility back where it belongs. Husband, it's your responsibility to explain to your 14-year-old son, that the reason you are leaving is because you've been unfaithful, and that way, you avoid your child blaming you for being the bearer of the bad message.
- Dr. James Dobson: At some point, when they're a little older, the truth needs to come out. I have seen 30- and 40-year-old people who just now discovered that they were mad at the wrong parent.



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- Dr. Arch Hart: That's right. That's true. The other principle here is one is put the responsibility back where it belongs. The other is that you have to often prepare the way for the truth. And there are some children, for whom that information would be devastating. They are too sensitive. They're too anxiety-riddled or whatever, too depressed. Prepare the way, take care of the pain, the depression, and then ultimately the truth must prevail.
- Dr. James Dobson: Next question.
- Student 3: You dealt with the anger that children have with their parents. How about the anger they have with God? How do you deal with that and fight through that issue?
- Dr. Arch Hart: Good question. These are all good questions. You've been preparing them for this.
- Dr. James Dobson: They're bright kids.
- Dr. Arch Hart: You are absolutely right. Children get angry at God. And the more Christian or religious the parents, the more they take it out on God. Because you've taught your children how to pray. You've taught your children how to believe in prayer. Now they pray that somehow mommy and daddy will get together again and it doesn't happen. And who do they blame for that? It is God. And, and so I'd have a section in the book in which I talk about rebuilding a child's faith, and you rebuild a child's faith, not by attacking the other, but by modeling the principles of Christian life and living the principles of forgiveness, the principles of kindness. And that I think is the most powerful way we can restore a child's faith.
- Dr. James Dobson: Next question.
- Student 4: How do you reach out to adult children who have never worked through their divorce of their parents?
- Dr. Arch Hart: Thank you. I have another book, just so happens, called, *Growing up Divorced*, which is the sequel to this one. And I think it's a good point. I think every child who goes through divorce, as an adult has to realize they have unfinished business. It wasn't until I was 35, then I sat up one day and said, "You've got all this unfinished business." It was showing up in my marriage. It was showing up



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in my parenting. And suddenly I realized I need to work through some of that. I hadn't forgiven my own parents. My attitudes to them were shaped by the fact that I had not deliberately and consciously forgiven them. I had developed a dependence on father figures. I was always searching for a substitute father.

Dr. Arch Hart: And Lee Edward Travis, who you knew as the founding dean, and when I first came to Fuller, became my substitute father. We have similar research interests and so on. And I had to sit up one day. I said, "You can't do that." And that unfinished business, I had to sit down and do some very careful thinking and talking it out with someone. And then I wrote the book where I try to articulate what some of that unfinished business is.

Dr. James Dobson: The book's still in print?

Dr. Arch Hart: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And the title of it?

Dr. Arch Hart: *Growing up Divorced.*

Dr. James Dobson: And who published it?

Dr. Arch Hart: Servant. Which is for children who once they're grown up now have to deal with that unfinished business.

Dr. James Dobson: Another subject for another day, right?

Dr. Arch Hart: That's probably true.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay. Well, we've been talking about the book, *Helping Children Survive Divorce, What to Expect, How to Help*, with Dr. Archibald Hart from Fuller Theological Seminary and Fuller School of Psychology, former Dean of Fuller, great friend to this ministry and to Shirley and me personally, you and Kathleen mean a lot to us Arch, and you flew all the way over here to be with us these two days, and I sure appreciate it. And thanks to all the students for the excellent questions that you asked as well, it's been good to have you here and we'll do it again.

I hope, and I believe that what we've been doing today has been helpful to parents who are out there and to children. A lot of kids listen to this program.



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They're always been amazing that in the carpool, on the way to school and so on. I had a youngster last week, about 10 years old, came up and talked to me about all the programs in the last week that he heard. So anyway, I hope that we've been helpful to a lot of people. And I know this book will again, keep writing Arch-

Dr. Arch Hart: Thank you Jim.

Dr. James Dobson: And when you get your next book done, come on back.

Dr. Arch Hart: Right. I will. And thank you for allowing the word like this to get out. You have a phenomenal ministry. You don't need any stroking, I know that, but I want to say it anyway. Thank you for what you're doing for the kingdom, Jim.

Dr. James Dobson: That's a gift from the Lord. He's given us the eyes and ears of a lot of people, and my prayer is that we won't do anything to mess it up. Thank you, everybody. God's blessings to you.

Roger Marsh: Well, that was the conclusion of a two-part conversation between Dr. Dobson and Dr. Arch Hart, on the topic of children of divorce. Even though it was a painful topic to address, we hope that you've been encouraged by today's and yesterday's programs. Divorce leaves a permanent mark on kids, but there are ways that parents and family members and friends can step in and help a child work through his or her hurt and confusion. To learn more about Dr. Arch Hart, his work and his books, including, *Helping Children Survive Divorce*, visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. And of course, you can always give us a call at (877) 732-6825. We're here to answer any questions you might have about Family Talk or the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. We can also suggest a resource for you, and we're always happy to pray with you too.

That number again is (877) 732-6825. Now, before we go, I want to tell you about a valuable resource that is now available from the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. It's our weekly public policy email. Our policy team is led by our esteemed colleague here at the Institute, attorney and policy director, James Gottry. The team breaks down the political issues of our nation that affect the family, and then wraps them in a biblical worldview just for you. Now, we want to equip you to think critically and biblically, about what's going on in our nation, so that you can understand the truth and then get involved. To sign up



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for policy emails, go to drjamesdobson.org/policy. That's drjamesdobson.org/policy. Thanks so much for listening to Family Talk Today. From all of us here at the JDFI, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening and join us again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

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