

Episode 362 How Children are Impacted by Emotional Abuse

Heads up, friend: What you're about to read is a raw, unedited transcript straight from the robots. That means you'll find some weird words, funky punctuation, and moments that make you go, "Huh?" If you want the real experience (and to actually know what's going on), I recommend reading the polished article, listening to the full episode, or watching it on 1.5x speed with captions on. Your brain will thank you.

Today we are gonna be talking about the impact of emotional and spiritual abuse on our kids. This is episode 362 of the Flying Free Podcast, and this is also part seven of my series called Emotional Abuse 1 0 1. Everything you need to know. So we're gonna be asking, what is emotional and spiritual abuse in the home doing to our children?

And right behind that question comes the question. Uh, wouldn't divorce be worse? Most of us absorbed a simple equation somewhere along the way. Divorce equals damage to children. And then intact family equals healthy children, therefore stay married no matter what. And by the way, I am going to, um, I wanna give a little caveat before I dig into this, because some of you are not going to be able to leave and I'm gonna be ta, I'm gonna be sharing with you research that shows the impact, the negative impacts of emotional and especially spiritual abuse when you combine those two together.

Impacts it even. It just has an even greater impact on kids who are living in environments like this. And some of you are not gonna be in a position where you're able to get out, at least not now. Maybe down the road you might be able to, but right now you're just literally not in a position to get out.

And I don't want this episode to bring you shame or a great deal of fear or anything because I still believe, and what, what, I'm gonna talk about this at the very end, that there are ways that you can mitigate some of these bad if effects. Alright? You are the one, and there's ways that you can do that.

So we'll talk about that too, but. I, what I wanna do in this episode is get rid of this. I this lie that is circulating out there that says, I don't want you, I don't want the idea that, well, if I leave or if I get divorced, then my kids are gonna fall apart. I don't want that. That's actually not, that's not research-based truth, all right?

And I don't want that idea to get in the way of you getting out. If you can get out, like if that's the only reason why you're staying. Then I think today's episode is going to help you. Alright? Either way though, whether you stay or leave at the very end, I'm gonna talk about again, what you can do to make a difference in your child's life.

Alright? So let's get into this. Uh, when we're talking about Christian circles, which is this, uh, this podcast is for Christians, so that's who I'm speaking to. I think this gets an extra layer of spiritual weight because you hear things like God hates divorce, which by the way, the Bible doesn't say that.

All right. I've talked about this many times in the podcast. There are books written about this. There are bible scholars that have gone over this. Not every translation even says it because it's actually not what the Bible, um, in the original language actually says. So that is a cultural thing that you hear.

It's like a Christian cliché. Um, we need to get rid of that because it's not true. Alright? So, um, or the idea children need their father. Um, I go into this a little bit more in detail on the audio version of this podcast. I'm gonna try to condense it a little bit more for video, but, um, not, not really. I mean, do, I mean, yes, children need a good father, but do they have a good father if their father is abusive?

No they don't. Or you made a covenant, well, did you make that covenant knowing full well who your husband was? Or was he wearing a mask when you said, I do, and you didn't know, you thought you were marrying someone that you didn't end up actually marrying. So if you were tricked into that covenant, then is that really valid?

Uh, think of what you're doing to your kids. That's what we're gonna be talking about today. So anyway, because of all of these things circulating in our Christian environments and cultures, women end up staying. They stay through the contempt and the criticism. They stay through the stonewalling and the gaslighting. They stay and try to manage everybody's emotions because they genuinely believe that if they can hold the marriage together and keep the peace, even a marriage that's destroying them, that that's the most loving Christian thing that they can do for their children.

And that is the belief I wanna dig into today. Not because I think that divorce is easy or painless. A dear God almighty, it is not. But because the research shows us something that actually is kind of surprising, if you've been raised to believe these things, the question we should be asking isn't divorce versus marriage.

It's really safety versus chronic harm. I think those are two very different things to talk about or to compare. So let's start with what the research tells us about children who grow up in emotionally abusive homes, whether or not divorce enters the picture. Researchers study. And by the way, I'll put the research in the show notes on my website.

So if you wanna go in and see where all of this research is coming from, you can do that and you can do your own research if you want to. But when they study child maltreatment, they consistently find that emotional neglect and abuse can be as harmful as and sometimes more harmful long-term. Then physical or sexual abuse.

Now, I know that might be hard to hear, especially if you have spent your whole life minimizing what's happening in your home because, well, at least he doesn't hit me, or at least the kids aren't being physically hurt. But emotional abuse, rewires children's brains studies shows chaotic, literal changes in brain development, delays in hitting developmental milestones.

Learning problems, difficulty processing positive feedback. Kids in these environments develop insecure attachment styles, so they struggle with trust, self-worth, and regulating their own emotions. And these struggles don't just disappear when they turn 18. They follow these kids into adulthood and they show up as with higher rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, personality disorders, substance use, academic failure, unemployment, and chronic health problems.

And here's something I important too. Children don't have to be the direct target of the abuse to be harmed by it. Kids who swim in that kind of environment. So if your husband is coercively controlling you, even covertly manipulating you, they, and this can include all kinds of things. It can include verbal aggression, intimidation, contempt, uh, anything that characterizes emotionally abusive marriages, which we've already talked about in this series.

Children who grew up in, in homes like this show elevated risks for emotional, behavioral and social problems. We're talking about sleep disturbances, fear, developmental delays in younger children, and then in older teens and uh, kids, we see depression and anxiety, substance abuse, delinquency, and suicidal thoughts.

I have experienced this firsthand. All right. I've seen this all firsthand. One study on children in high conflict divorce situations found. And, and I wanna just point this out, high conflict divorce is inevitable. If you're married to an

abuser, if there's conflict in your marriage, then there will absolutely be high conflict in a divorce process.

Sometimes even much more ramped up. Alright? Because now there, now your control, your controller, your coercive controller abuser is now losing control of you. So he's going to weaponize to find as many weapons as he can. And one of their biggest weapons that they use against their target is kids. Their kids are a, a commodity to them.

They don't care. They don't truly care about the wellbeing of their kids because if they did, they would've treated their kids' mother very differently. So, um, anyways, one of the, the studies, um, in these divorce situations found that nearly half of the kids. Who went through a high con, who were in the middle of a high conflict divorce situation were at increased risk for PTSD symptoms, not because of the divorce, because of the conflict.

Okay. The conflict itself, that's what traumatizes children. So when someone tells you to stay for the kids, what they may be actually telling you without realizing it is. To continue exposing your children to an environment that is actively harming their development. Now, I realize they may not know they're not.

They may not be educated in these things or have any experience in these things. They may have been brainwashed or taught something completely different, you know, in seminary or wherever, but that is not love. You need to know, that's not love. That's not protection. That is sacrificing your children on the altar of an institution.

And that's what a lot of institutions want you to do because it serves them. Always. Remember, whenever someone is trying to get you to do something or not do something, what is their agenda? Look at their agenda. Everyone's got an agenda, right? And church's agenda is suppo and people who call themselves Christians, their agenda is supposed to be Jesus Christ and love.

So. Unfortunately, it doesn't show up like that very much. All right, now here's where our conversation Now we're gonna get into that it, this is, we're going to talk about things now that you're not gonna hear in secular resources on this topic, but it's very critical if you are in a Christian context, which that's what this podcast is for, right?

When emotional abuse happens inside of a religious framework. It doesn't just damage children psychologically, now it damages them spiritually. So Mama

who loves Jesus, if you want your kids to love Jesus, this is not the way to teach them all right, this is going to do damage to them. That spiritual damage creates an additional layer of harm that can take decades to untangle for your kids into their adult lives.

Spiritual abuse of children looks like using God, using the Bible or religious, the idea of religious authority to justify harsh treatment, it sounds like, well, God says you must obey or your sinful and rebellious, it sounds like God's gonna punish you if you tell anyone about this. It's framing control and cruelty as biblical or God's will.

In abusive Christian homes. And I, I hate putting those words together, but I, I do that because that's what people in these abusive Christian homes think that they're in, they think they're in a Christian home. It's not, you're not in a Christian marriage. If there's abuse going on that's not Christian.

Okay? So I think it's important to get out of that denial phase and just face the fact that if you're in an abusive marriage, you were not in a Christian marriage. You may have wanted to be, you may have grown up your whole life dreaming of being in a beautiful Christian marriage, but that's unfortunately not what you ended up.

You got tricked, you got hoodwinked. It's not your fault, but now that is your reality. So that's why this podcast exists to help you face that reality and figure out what your next steps. So in these abusive Christian homes, spiritual abuse almost always overlaps with emotional abuse. The shaming and scapegoating and constant criticism gets wrapped in this big religious package.

This and a lot of religious language, which is very powerful. Especially for women who really want to, you know, who love God and want to do what's right. Um, and that does something very particularly insidious and I think satanic, it hijacks a child's relationship with God. It's hijacking your relationship with God.

Quite frankly, research on what is called spiritual injury shows that abused children often develop profound guilt, debilitating guilt. Anger at God, fear of death, and the belief that God is unfair, punishing or untrustworthy. Basically, it's blaspheming how God really, really is. It's not the kid's fault that they, that they're thinking or you know, and even some of you maybe grew up in families like this and you're struggling with this.

It's not your fault. That's how you were programmed. That's what you experienced. You have, you have experienced spiritual, religious trauma. Of course you would have a reaction against God in that way. But that is, that is, uh, that I, I call that blasphemous just because whenever something, whenever something, um, teaches something that's the opposite of who God is, which is pure love, that's blaspheming God's name.

Talk about taking the name of the Lord in vain. It's not just saying God. All right. So anyway, when abuse is religiously justified, when a child hears. Well, God wants this, or the Bible says that you deserve this. Outcomes are often worse than if you take the same abuse that does not have that religious framing.

There are higher levels of depression, anxiety, PTSD and aggression. Think about what that means. These children are not just losing safety in their homes. They are losing their sense of identity in Christ. Their sense of who they are, their sense of who they are in relation to God. They're losing their ability to experience their creator as loving and trustworthy, and someone that can support them through the hard things of life.

So when we talk about the impact on kids in emotionally abusive Christian marriages, we have to understand that spiritual abuse, abuse acts as a multiplier. I'm gonna say that again. Spiritual abuse acts as a multiplier of emotional abuse. It does everything that emotional abuse does, and then it goes further by poisoning the child's ability to find comfort, hope, and healing in their faith.

It makes recovery harder and longer because survivors have to somehow disentangle God from their abuse, from abuse. They have to figure out whether the voice in their head shaming them is their own conscience or God, or just the internalized voice of their abusive parent, and that is why I'm so passionate about helping Christian women get out of these situations.

It's not just about the women, although that would be reason enough. It's also about breaking the cycle before a whole nother generation grows up, believing that God endorses cruelty and control. All right, so what we've established or we have established that emotional and spiritual abuse cause serious documented harm to children.

I hope we've established that anyway, but now let's talk about what you've been told is worse, which is divorce. And I think that we need to really be honest with ourselves and understand the propaganda that we've been sold. Yes, divorce is hard on kids. There's no doubt about it. Research confirms that most

children will, of course, they're gonna experience emotional pain and disruption when their parents divorce, especially in the short term.

The first two years tend to be the hardest because they're sometimes, some of them are moving homes. There's custody arrangements, there's court dates, maybe they're changing schools. They're adjusting to two different homes that is real and it's painful. Children of divorce do show somewhat higher rates of academic struggles, behavior problems, and emotional distress compared to children from get this low conflict, continuously married families.

The key is the low conflict. Okay? About 25% or about a quarter of children from divorced families experience some social, emotional or psychological changes, challenges compared to about 10% of from low conflict, non divorced families. Here's what those statistics don't tell you. First of all, about eight in 10 children from divorced homes.

Do not suffer serious lifelong problems. 80% adapt and adjust and grow up to be successful, healthy adults. That is not a story that you hear in church very often. Is it? By the way, I just wanna put in a plug for Gretchen Baskerville. She wrote a brilliant book called *The Lifesaving Divorce*, and she has an amazing YouTube channel with lots of really, really wonderful videos as well as a wonderful, um.

Website, and I highly recommend that you dig into her stuff because she does a ton of research and she can tell you even more about the research that, uh, and she's also, she's worked with divorced families for many, many years, decades. So she's got a lot of experience, she's got a lot of knowledge. Um, she's brilliant.

And I think I would, I would, I definitely recommend her. We've had her on the Flying Free podcast several times, but definitely go check out her stuff if you wanna hear more about this. But. The biggest predictor, uh, of children of how children fare is not whether their parents are divorced. It is the level of conflict before the divorce, during the divorce, and after the divorce when researchers control for preexisting family conflict.

The differences between children of divorce and children from intact families narrow significantly. Much of the increased risk that we see in children of divorce is actually linked not to the divorce, but to the conflict that they're already experiencing in the home. Studies show that children raised in high conflict or abusive homes can have outcomes up to 10 times worse if parents stay together than if they divorce.

I'm gonna say that again. Staying in a high conflict abusive marriage can be up to 10 times more damaging to your children than getting a divorce. Again, you're not gonna hear that about that in church. In fact, some researchers describe divorce after a high conflict marriage as a stress relief event for children.

I've experienced this firsthand. Okay. When the conflict drops and at least one home becomes stable and safe, children's adjustment often improves. Over time, the divorce doesn't damage them. The divorce rescues them. Now, this does not mean that divorce is beneficial in every situation. Research suggests that for children whose parents have a low conflict marriage.

That means like the parents, maybe they're just kind of living together like roommates, all right? That they, that staying together does tend to produce better outcomes than divorcing. But I'm not talking to those people today. I'm talking to women whose marriages are characterized by emotional abuse, coercive control, chronic conflict, and spiritual manipulation for your children.

The research points in a very different direction. Staying in a toxic marriage means that your children continue to accumulate what researchers call adverse childhood experiences or ACEs. Witnessing domestic violence is an ace. Experiencing direct emotional abuse is an ace. Living with a parent who has mental health struggles or an addiction is an ace, and the ACEs ACEs stack.

The more ACEs a child experiences, the higher their risk for lifelong health problems. Mental health struggles, substance abuse and relationship difficulties, divorce all by itself. One ace. Staying in abusive marriage loads multiple ACEs onto your child's life year after year. So when you're lying awake at night wondering what's best for your kids, I want you to hold onto this.

You're not choosing between a good option and a bad option. You're choosing between continued harm and a hard transition that will ultimately lead to safety. And I, I think for children, I think you would agree that for children in emotionally and spiritually abusive homes, safety is the better choice if you can get out.

So let's talk about that. Let's talk about what actually helps, because I think there's some good news here. The research identifies several protective factors that consistently buffer children from the impacts of both abuse and divorce, and the most powerful one is something that you can provide you.

Children need at least one safe, stable, emotionally attuned caregiver. One person who believes them, who offers consistent support, who is present and responsive, that person can change everything in the midst of chaos and dysfunction, one safe relationship can become an anchor point that helps a child develop resilience and hope.

And that's you mama. You can be that person. And if you've been wondering whether leaving would somehow make things worse for your kids, you need to know that your presence and your safety and your healing and your emotional availability, because you've done this work on you first. That's what your children need most, not a legal document.

Keeping the family, you know, technically together they need you. And by the way, you need to become that person. You need to become the version of yourself that you need to be for your kids so that you can be present. You need to heal. You need to get the skills, the emotional, uh, emotional stability skills for yourself so that you can then model that for your kids and be that emotionally stable parent.

And that's what I do inside of Flying Free. You can go to join Flying Free dot com to find out more beyond that safe relationship. Other protective factors include reduced exposure to conflict. After a separation or divorce, and this is where concepts like parallel parenting become important. It might mean firm boundaries or limited contact with the abusive parent or supervised visitation if necessary.

All right. The goal is to lower the temperature, stop the bleeding, and create at least one home where peace is possible. Access to trauma-informed mental care and mental healthcare also matters. Therapy, it's gonna help kids process what they've experienced so they can make sense of it and metabolize it in their system.

For children who have experienced spiritual abuse, on top of that, they may need support in reconstructing a healthier view of God. Okay? If you don't have a healthier view of God, you're not gonna be able to pass that on to your kids either. So, and again, that is something that, that's one of the biggest.

One of the, I shouldn't say it's the biggest, it's one of the very big things that we do inside of Flying Free. Join Flying Free dot com to go learn more about that. So they need to be able to separate their abuser's voice from God's voice so that they can reclaim their faith as a source of comfort and hope instead of tremendous fear and guilt.

And also, if you have supportive family, they can help. Some of us didn't have supportive family, but some of you do. Also, some of some of us didn't have supportive faith communities, but some of you have supportive faith communities. Faith communities that can affirm the child's safety and worth rather than just press and, and the mother's worth as well, rather than pressuring the family to reconcile at all costs.

That can help. Sometimes schools can provide predictable structure in caring adults who can help. Here's something hopeful to hang on to. Most children will recover from the initial disruption of divorce within about two years when they have appropriate support and at least one safe home. That is good news, and again, that's what I've experienced in my own personal walking through this.

Many children of divorce will grow up to be independent, resourceful, compassionate adults who build meaningful lives. The story doesn't have to end with trauma. There's a whole life ahead of them. For children coming out of spiritually abusive homes, specifically, healing often requires adults who will explicitly validate that the misuse of the Bible, we, the weaponization of the Bible was wrong.

Kids need someone to say that was not God. That was your father's. You know that was your father or your pastor, or your small group leader, or your Sunday school teacher using God's name to hurt you. They need people who will model non-coercive, compassionate faith that shows them that spirituality can be about love and hope, and peace, not control and fear.

Now you've maybe been told that you have these two options. Stay married and give your kids a stable home or divorce and damage them forever. I think that's a false choice. It's a framework built on incomplete information and frankly, on theology that prioritizes institutional marriage over human beings.

The real choice in front of you isn't intact family versus broken family. The real choice is, do I continue exposing my children to an environment that research shows is harming their brains and their emotional development and their attachment systems and their relationship with God. Do I make the hard, painful, courageous choice to create safety for them, even though that safety comes in a different package than I once imagined?

I'm not gonna pretend that leaving is easy. It's not. There is grief involved. Even when it's the right decision, you're gonna grieve the family that you hoped that you would have, the family that you thought you were raising your kids in, you

know, the home that you thought you were raising your kids in, and your children are gonna grieve too.

And the first two years are gonna be very rocky, but grief is not the same thing as damage. Grief is clean pain. Damage is dirty. Pain hard feelings are are not the same thing as harm. Your children can experience the sadness or the clean pain of divorce and still be healthier, safer, and more whole than they would've been staying in a home that's full of contempt, lies control, guilt, and fear.

Also, our kids are watching us. They're learning from us what love is supposed to look like, what marriage is supposed to look like, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a man. When we are in, when they're growing up in an abusive home, they learn that that's normal. They learn that that's what they should expect in their own future relationships.

They learn to either grow up and be like dad in their relationship and control other people. And that's how I feel safe. Or to be like mom in that relationship and to let other people control and ma and I, and then they manage other people's emotions and that that's safe. When you leave, what you're saying is that's not okay.

And I, and human beings deserve better. We teach them something different. We teach them that human beings matter. They matter. You matter. Safety matters. It's possible to choose safety without being selfish. You end up breaking the cycle and changing the whole story, not just for yourself, but for generations to come.