



A HOUSE DIVIDED

Single-parent families **can** stand—
if your church supports them.
Find out how.

“My grandma says divorce is a sin. Does that mean
my parents aren’t Christians anymore?”

“Why doesn’t my Mommy want to be here with all of
us anymore?”

“I think my parents *hate* each other.”

“I can’t go to the Mother/Daughter Tea this year. That’s
my weekend with my dad.”

“I don’t think I can stand one more father figure!”

By Lori Niles

There is no typical picture of a child in the midst of family crisis. Divorce can strike in homes that've seemed relatively peaceful, or it can be the end to months and years of gut-wrenching conflict. There's no average age for a child of divorcing parents, no typical new family configuration, and no predictable amount of time to adjust to the change. Nor is there a certain set of behaviors that clue us in to the fact that things aren't stable in the home environment. Often the first clue we have that something is amiss is a comment like those on the previous page in the context of normal conversation.

One million children each year will experience a new divorce. So how can we help kids whose lives are being radically altered by divorce? How can we help them come to grips with a new kind of family life? How can we offer continuous support while their worlds sway around them for weeks, months, or years? How can we protect kids in single-parent homes from becoming part of the horrendous statistical data that links family status to all sorts of social ills?

"One thing that we as a church can do," says Gary Sprague of Kids Hope in Woodland Park, Colorado, "is to validate to these children that their families are still valued. For the parent, one is a whole number, and the single-parent is still a complete family."

The mission of Gary's organization is to bring hope and healing to kids in single-parent or blended families. He does that by bringing high-impact weekend seminars to local churches.

Divorce impacts all children whose parents experience it—but in different ways and to different degrees. Much depends on the support available in making the transition from a two-parent family to two separate families. Our churches can be part of the restorative process if we better understand commonalities of the affected children and as we listen carefully to these families' unique needs.

KIDS' NEEDS

Children of divorce experience grief in much the same way that survivors of any loss do. Rather than viewing the grief process as a linear progression, it's helpful to imagine it as a spiral that includes denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and forgiveness. These stages may present themselves over and over as a child enters different stages of maturity. For example, the anger in a preschool child may show up as increased crying and demand for attention, while in the early elementary years, it may resurface as behavior problems at school. Preschoolers may bargain by promising to "be good" if Mommy or Daddy will come home. Elementary-age children may devise elaborate schemes to bring their parents back together and make promises to God about what they'll do if God will only answer their prayers for their parents to be together again.

Any stage of grieving that appears to have been resolved can be triggered again as life stages change. The third-grader who seems to have reached a stage of forgiveness for Dad moving away may become intensely angry in fifth grade when Dad's not there for a school play or soccer tournament. Or a preschooler who feels great about making a Father's Day gift for Uncle John may become withdrawn and depressed as the second grade father-son overnight camp approaches and he realizes that no one else is bringing his uncle. Another change that often provokes a regression in the grief cycle occurs when a parent begins to date.

These stages of grief are normal. Children need the freedom to talk about their feelings and thoughts. Give them guidance in how to make good and healthy decisions even when their feelings are spinning out of control. Just as kids experiencing the death of a parent often ask some profoundly spiritual questions, children experiencing divorce also have questions. Many kids wonder, "Where is God when I'm hurting?" and "If God can do anything, why didn't God stop this from happening?"

Support groups such as Linda Sibley's Confident Kids groups, can help children ponder these questions in a non-threatening environment while learning valuable life skills that may be missing. Confident Kids groups require that as a child meets with others to share her experiences, at least one parent attends a separate adult group. That way kids and adults can learn skills to build healthy new family units. This also has two primary benefits for the parent. First, it offers parents the opportunity to feel as though they're focusing on something positive for their children's healing. And second, it gives caretaking parents a chance to find their bearings while adjusting to their new marital status.

A small group opportunity for children in the process of divorce recovery is best offered at a time that doesn't single out children from other ongoing ministries they might be involved in, such as Sunday school or midweek programs. Instead, make the opportunity available when other programs aren't competing for kids' attention.

SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES' NEEDS

While not all single-parent families are born from divorce, most single-parent families experience similar needs. As kids are trying to find their balance in this new world, parents are trying to cope with a laundry list of day-to-day issues. These issues fall into four main categories: children, vehicles, households, and finances.

- **Children**—Instead of having an in-house partner to talk to about what the kids are or aren't doing and how issues should be handled, single parents often have no one close enough to lend balance to their discipline challenges or give input

to help stave off power struggles. In addition, child-care needs are multiplied, and options for a parent's "down time" are limited or non-existent. In families with more than one child, it's next to impossible to find one-on-one time with each child.

Successful support ministries recognize these needs and find ways to partner with single parents to meet these challenges. Some churches have established mentor programs in which another parent comes alongside the single parent in telephone support, baby-sitting on a regular basis, or taking one child home from church while the other child has a "date" with Mom or Dad. When these mentorships are provided by a two-parent family, children benefit from having the presence of male and female role models.

- **Vehicles**—Transportation and vehicle maintenance are often ongoing issues in single-parent families, especially when headed by women. One church has addressed this problem through its men's ministry, which hosts a car care day every month. During this event, men from the congregation perform routine auto maintenance, such as oil changes, for single parents. Sometimes these men help a single parent shop for a different vehicle, and they offer their expertise in getting the best value.
- **Households**—Similar needs arise in dealing with home maintenance, and your church can mobilize people to be on call for emergency services. Because moves are sometimes necessary in the early days, keep a list of potential vehicles and people in your congregation that might be available for moving items.
- **Finances**—Finally, money is nearly always an issue in single-parent homes. The standard of living for a single mother declines by an average of 45 percent after a divorce. In addition to offering tangible benevolent support such as food, clothing, and cash gifts, consider supplementing the cost of activities for children. If possible, make arrangements for partial scholarships to activities to help minimize the cost for single-parent families. Your church can also offer financial planning and counseling services to strengthen a family's long-term financial well-being.

Do all these needs add up to a drain on church resources? Gary Sprague answers with a resounding no!

"The healing of brokenness leads to great contribution in the body," Gary says. "One church I now did a study on the percentage of single-parent contributions in relation to their total income and discovered that [single parents'] giving was significantly higher than the giving among the rest of the congregation."

In fact, one of the ways to validate a single-parent family is to help its members participate in the church with a full range of gifts and talents.

THE CHURCH'S NEEDS

In addition to bringing talents and gifts into your church, Gary points out that single-parent families offer your church the opportunity to meet at least two important Scriptural mandates:

"Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow"—Isaiah 1:17.

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world"—James 1:27.

"The widows and orphans of our society are found in single-parent families," Gary says.

We may miss the opportunity to benefit from the presence of single-parent families by having any of the following unproductive attitudes:

- "This man needs a wife!" or "This woman needs a husband!"
- Healthy marriages will somehow be contaminated by hanging around with divorced people.
- If we support a single-parent family, it's the same as approval of divorce.

None of these attitudes could be further from the truth. The richness that comes to our churches through the healing experienced in divorced families is a precious gift of God and speaks volumes about the love of the reconciling God we serve.

"Many churches are family-oriented," says Linda. "In the mind of the church, we *mean* to include everyone who attends. But in the mind of a single parent, the word 'family' alone can be isolating."

Linda suggests that we make a conscious effort to use inclusive phrases such as "church family" instead of "family." The idea that marriage and parenting are synonymous with family is a big mistake in today's world. We need to offer opportunities for all kinds of families—two parent, single-parent, non-parent (no children in the home), and other-parent (children live with people who aren't their parents)—to come together as the redeemed community of Christ.

We also need to be aware of the subtle ways we portray families. If our church logos picture a mom, dad, and two kids, we may unintentionally alienate a whole group of people. To look at your church's events through the eyes of a sensitive single parent, consider these issues:

- Are the events named in such a way that they welcome individuals and families of all kinds? It's worth sacrificing cute titles, such as "Doughnuts With Dad," for the sake of making everyone feel welcome.
- Are the images inclusive of all kinds of family configurations? Remember there are families of all kinds: two-parent, single-parent, non-parent, and other-parent.
- Are child-care arrangements offered for all events that include parents? This is especially a need for single parents.
- Have you considered how to make each event easier for single-parent families? For example, many single parents are better able to participate in midweek events if a meal is provided

Your church can be a haven of peace and acceptance to families recovering from the crisis of divorce. Provide a place of consistency in the lives of children and parents as they begin their healing process. As you nurture and care for these new family units, being careful to address the specific needs of individual families, you'll bear witness to the restoring power of God's love.

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