

MINISTERING TO SINGLE-PARENT KIDS

Gary Sprague

More than half the children growing up in the United States today will spend part of their childhood living in a single-parent family. Whether through death, divorce, separation, or abandonment, these children are hurting and are needing help and hope before recovery can take place. Here are four building blocks to recovery I have found helpful in ministering to these innocent victims.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: HOW IT FEELS (*Breaking the Silence Barrier*)

The first step is for these children to break the silence barrier and begin talking about their feelings. During this process these children need help in beginning to work through the various stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Some add another stage called hope. However, I like to call this final stage of recovery “forgiveness.”

In addition to the stages of grief, these children will feel confused, afraid, helpless, hopeless, lonely, lost, rejected, and worried. The goal during this first building block is to get these children to talk and realize that other kids share the same feelings. Explain to them how “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

BUILDING BLOCK 2: THINGS THAT CHANGE (*A World Turned Upside Down*)

The next step is for these children to begin to adjust to a world that has just been turned upside down. They may have to adjust to less contact with their parents, changing work schedules, moving to new neighborhoods, having less money, and having more responsibility. Losing a parent also has an effect on a child’s feelings of safety and security.

Kids worry about the changes in their lives. These might include: Who will take care of me? Are my parents crazy? Where are Dad/Mom going to live? Will we have enough money now? Will I have to move or change schools? Will I have to find new friends?

Change takes time. The goal of this block is to allow kids the necessary time to make the transition from what is familiar to what is unfamiliar. Well-meaning adults can sometimes rush kids through these transitions, only making the process take longer.

Active listening is a key element in making kids feel that they have permission to be upset about their lives being overturned. It is also more effective than telling them to get on with life as if nothing has really happened. Explain that Jesus is the solid rock and that they can count on Him because God has said, “I will never

leave you; I will never forget you. ...I will not be afraid because the Lord is my helper” (Hebrews 13:5, 6, ICB*).

BUILDING BLOCK 3: NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS (*Strangers Becoming Family Members*)

When a child enters this block, the process involves strangers such as boyfriends, girlfriends, stepparents, or half siblings becoming family members. Anytime a person is added to or taken away from a family, it changes the dynamics of that family system.

Families are made up of relationships, not just people. In single-parent families the relationships change as families are blended together. This blending disrupts established loyalties and creates new uncertainties for the children. The key elements to a successful blending are:

1. Time. If a parent chooses to date *and* the relationship has the potential to be long term, children need to be included in the process. They need time to adjust to these new relationships.
2. Avoid comparisons. Comparing dating partners and stepparents to birth parents is extremely hazardous to the emotional health of children. The best thing for parents to do is stay neutral, hold their tongue, and bring out the positive characteristics of the others.
3. Wisdom. Use wisdom when blending families together. The divorce rate is just under 50 percent for first-time marriages. For second-time marriages occurring within two years of the first divorce, it's close to 80 percent. These statistics tell us something about taking it slower and using wisdom when blending families.
4. Forgiveness. Allow forgiveness to heal the wounds. “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31, 32, NIV*). Much of the practical advice on helping kids can be broken down into these two verses.

BUILDING BLOCK 4: WHERE IS GOD WHEN I HURT? (*Asking the Spiritual Questions*)

The final building block is encouraging a child to ask questions about hurts that Band-Aids can't cover. It also involved explaining what the Bible says about trouble and hope. There is hope on this earth and in heaven. Hope on this earth means that God will provide comfort to kids every time that they have trouble. He does this so He can give comfort to others. I call this the “comfort virus.” This is why it's important for kids to be in support groups with other kids, so they can give and receive comfort.

One day all those who know Jesus Christ will experience hope of eternal life where there is no more trouble, pain, death, divorce, separation, abandonment, or loss. God has truly provided for all our needs.

The goal of the building blocks of recovery is for kids to be drawn into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. When the felt needs of our kids are met, their eyes will be opened up to their real need to know God, to understand that they matter to Him, and to experience Him as a “father to the fatherless.”

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SPECIFIC WAYS TO MINISTER TO THESE KIDS

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1. ***Spend one-on-one time with them.*** They need this individualized attention from an adult because they've been put on hold during their parents' separation/divorce. Both extrovert and shy, withdrawn children will respond to your investment of time.
2. ***Give them positive attention.*** Because these kids are "love hungry," they will seek attention in whatever way they can get it. Find jobs for them that will give you time for personal interaction and help them get attention in a positive way. Compliment their efforts so they'll feel effective and useful.
3. ***Know their family background.*** Being a child of divorce doesn't give a license to misbehavior. However, leaders knowing the family background could avoid most behavioral problems in a structured setting. You can't help someone you don't know.
4. ***Acknowledge their emotions.*** Give kids an opportunity to talk about their feelings. Be nonjudgmental and don't feel that you have to come up with answers. Just let these children know that you care and are willing to listen. Offer to pray with them, and talk about forgiveness when it is appropriate.
5. ***Get them in touch with other single-parent kids.*** By getting kids together who have similar problems, you encourage empathy instead of sympathy. Kids respond well to knowing that they aren't the only ones who feel that way.
6. ***Make appropriate referrals when needed.*** Don't try to be superhuman! When reactions seem overly severe or children reveal issues – abuse or addictions – that are beyond your ability to provide help, try to involve a qualified trained professional.
7. ***Be a big brother/sister to the family.*** It's hard to be two parents in one, so offer to give the parent a break. Plan activities as a group first; it will provide a non-threatening atmosphere for the kids to build positive relationships with a Christian adult role model. But be careful to screen those wanting to be involved. The last thing these kids need is for someone else to hurt them.
8. ***Provide resources for the parents.*** Begin a resource network for single-parent and blended families. There are plenty of needs, including food, clothing, finances, house repairs, car repairs, lawn work, child care, and emotional support. This task requires someone to coordinate resources within your network and then distribute the information out to those who are in need. Most of these parents won't come and ask for help even though it is sorely needed.
9. ***Be a helper, not a rescuer.*** The tendency for anyone involved in helping those who are hurting is to rescue them from their pain. This rescuer role must be guarded if you truly want to help these kids. Authentic change can only happen when a person makes good use of your resources and help by being willing to make things different.