



# Be the Bridge: Five Foundational Principles to Help Single Parents

By Gary Sprague

In Page, Arizona there is a bridge spanning a grand expanse called the Glen Canyon Dam Bridge. This structure holds back water from Lake Powell and regulates its flow into the Colorado River as it rushes along the Grand Canyon floor. On a recent visit, I coaxed my three older kids to walk with me over the bridge. While on the bridge, God gave me a vision for Single Parent Family Ministry.

On the south rim I saw hundreds of thousands of single parents with their children at different stages along their single parent family journey. On the north rim I saw the hope and healing from pain, trouble and tears that can only be found in Christ. A vast chasm separated the single parent families from Christ's hope and healing. The vision was for the church to become the bridge that connects the two.

I believe that we as leaders (both paid and volunteer) have a great opportunity to "be the bridge" and walk single parents and their children from despair to hope and from pain to healing. Living life as a single parent is a journey with markers along the way to chart the course. This article will describe five of those markers—pauses on the journey that allow single parents to measure their progress and take certain truths to heart. Leaders who can help single parents to implement these life-changing principles will be well on their way to becoming the bridge towards hope and healing. Jump in and BE THE BRIDGE!

## Principle #1: Tell Kids the Truth

Most kids who live in single parent or blended families are hurting. They no longer feel like part of a family. They want their parents to get back together—to go back to the way things were in a happier time. They feel isolated, alone, without opportunities to talk out their fears and feelings. I believe they need to know why and how this all happened to them.

If asked, parents should tell these children the truth about why they live in a single parent home. Answer the question, "Why did my mom (or dad) leave?" If death took a parent away, kids need to know how their parent died. They also need to know when so the date of death can be commemorated.

If it was a divorce, children need to know that it was not their fault. The main reason children think that the divorce was their fault is because nobody has told them the reasons for the divorce. If it is a separation, explain what is happening and reassure them that they will still be loved and cared for even though the marriage

is in limbo. If their mother and father were never married, they should be told the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy. Leave no doubt in the child's mind that the circumstances of their birth had nothing to do with anything the child did.

Use the following tips to help single parents talk with their kids truthfully:

- Tell them the truth before they hear it from someone else! If you don't, you also risk having to deal with issues of trust and respect.

- Focus on the behavior, not on assassinating the character of the other parent. Attacks on character will have negative consequences and may ultimately harm your child.
- Let the kids lead the conversation. Kids who are quiet may need help in breaking through their blocked emotions. Encourage the children to ask questions—the hard questions. If their questions make you want to cry or get angry, set up a later time when you can control your emotions better—but keep the appointment.
- Sometimes what kids say isn't really what they want to ask. A kid who says "I hate you!" usually doesn't mean it! What he means is that he feels safe enough with you to express his emotions, even when he doesn't understand what is making him feel



the way he does. Try to get him to tell you more.

- The best way to talk about the changes that have happened in the family (or are about to happen) is to have both parents sit down with the kids and tell the same story. If this won't work, give the former spouse opportunities to "come clean" with the kids before you do it for him or her. If you are the one to tell the kids about their mom or dad's behavior, keep your emotions in

check (you need to find a safe adult to share those feelings with).

- Time and truth walk hand in hand. The kids will ask over and over about what happened. As they mature, you need to give more information on the way to full disclosure.

## Principle #2: Encourage Visitation

If at all possible, kids need to have a relationship with both birth parents. Kids long to have a relationship with both parents—it's how God designed us! Don't sabotage that longing because of your own emotions. Kids place such a high value on relationship with both parents that if either parent tries to inhibit contact, watch out for a backlash!

Kids have the right to have a relationship with both parents. Visitation opportunities should be encouraged and should not be used as a weapon against a former spouse. Disagreements about issues such as lifestyles, movies, foods, bedtimes, discipline, live-in girlfriend/boyfriend might not necessarily be good enough reasons to stop the visits. Encourage single parents to find godly counsel to try to resolve these tough issues.

Perhaps of even higher priority is safety. Kids should never be put at risk. Providing for safe situations is the responsibility of both parents. Be careful to separate out situations that are truly a safety issue with those things that are just outside of a parent's comfort zone. Encourage single parents to be realistic about situations that they can and can't control.

## Principle #3: Learning to Let Go

Single parents who constantly worry and try to control everything that goes on when the kids are with their former spouse are wasting both physical and emotional energy. That energy would be better spent on investing into the lives of their children when they have them in their own house.

Most of the success of this principle depends on giving up control and allowing God to step in. Perhaps it is a lack of faith that keeps them in the 'control zone' where they feel a need to control everything. As church leaders, you may need to help them find the right answers to these questions: Does God love their children? Can He take care of them when they are 'over there?' (Remember, we are not talking about turning our eyes and ears away from someone or something that would

bring harm.) We are talking about that age old prayer: God, grant me the serenity to change the things that I can change, to accept the things that I cannot change and the wisdom to know the difference.

## Principle #4: Modeling Forgiveness

This is probably the most difficult principle to implement. It is also the one principle that when implemented, will produce the most life change.

Single parents should be encouraged to start by asking their kids for forgiveness! Parents forget that they might need to do that. "I'm sorry for the pain that I have caused you. I did not mean for this to happen, but I know that it hurts. Will you please forgive me?" These are empowering words to children in single parent homes created by divorce. This is not an opportunity to get into how much more responsible the former spouse is for their child's pain. The quality of their former spouse's relationship with their kids is his or her responsibility.

Next, kids need to see forgiveness modeled in the actions and attitudes expressed toward the former spouse. Kids need to know that even after all the fighting, conflict, tears and anger, forgiveness is still possible. Modeling forgiveness to their kids by forgiving the former spouse is a process that may take years, but it all starts with an act of the will. Choose to forgive. Release the bitterness. Whether or not the former spouse cares or responds isn't important—there is comfort and freedom in exercising forgiveness.

## Principle #5: One is a Whole Number

Single parents and their families have value. God loves single parent families and in Him they are made whole. Embrace the full meaning of Psalm 68:5 ("I will be a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless") that God has stepped into the gap and completed the single parent family.

Don't let anyone tell your single parents that all they need is a new spouse! Blending a family is hard work! Make it possible for single parents to stay single until their kids are out of the home. Supply the single parent's need for relationship in your ministry so they don't feel compelled to date or get re-married until the kids are grown. What single parents need more than another spouse is

a supportive church that views them as whole. Instead of being pressured to remarry, single parent homes should be viewed as families and should be equipped to function as families. The kids need time and energy and love. God can be a husband and a father—God can complete the single parent family!

**Single parent families are not half a family. Single parents don't have kids growing up in a broken family. A single parent family is a whole family experiencing brokenness.**

Churches should be called on to fulfill James 1:27 which says, "Pure and undefiled religion is to visit widows (single parents) and orphans (kids in single parent or blended families) in their distress."

One way of reinforcing the concept that single parent families are whole and valued is to place single parent families into the Family Ministry of the church. Make sure that the Family Pastor has a heart for non-traditional families first. Single parents are not "Single Adults with Kids." Single parent families are a family that just so happens to be un-married. Single parent families are not half a family. Single parents don't have kids growing up in a broken family. A single parent family is a whole family experiencing brokenness.

Living life as a single parent can be extremely difficult, but with the help of leaders in the church and believers in the church coming alongside, the burdens can become lighter. Becoming the bridge for single parents and their children—enabling them to find hope and healing in Christ—is one of the most rewarding acts today's church can perform. The need is huge but the benefits—both now and for the future—are enormous! ☺

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