



Bringing hope and healing to kids in single-parent or blended families

HELP FOR THE MODERN-DAY ORPHAN

Having an effective ministry with children of divorce

by Gary Sprague

ABSTRACT

Divorce has become an epidemic, and the innocent victims of divorce are the children. The purpose of this article is to provide a program model for those working with children of divorce. Insight is given into why and how we should work with this population.

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THE NEED

Yesterday, the words “innocence” and “childhood” meant almost the same thing. Today, kids are exposed to things that they are emotionally unequipped to handle. Tomorrow, these children, without help, may repeat the same mistakes their parents made.

“Once upon a time, parents had lots of kids; today, kids have lots of parents.” Only 40% of the children growing up in the United State today will spend their entire childhood with their natural parents (Journal of Divorce, 1987). Statistics on children of alcoholics, abuse and neglect are just as sobering. The majority of kids today are kids who are hurting.

The Traditional American Family that consisted of a mother, a father and some kids is now in the minority. The Single-Parent Family has become the new norm for our society. Most people are keenly aware of the fact that the Single-Parent Family is the most rapidly growing “poverty-level” segment of our society. While other social groups are making strides up the socioeconomic ladder, the Single-Parent Family is headed full steam in reverse. All measures show this decline, including quality of life, financial status and emotional wellbeing.

It is being predicted that by the year 2000, the Blended Family will become the largest family grouping. This will be due to the fact that single parents will remarry more frequently than in the past when they stayed single.

What were the causes of the breakdown of the Traditional Family? Carle C. Zimmerman suggested nine elements of a disintegrating family in his work entitled *Family and Civilization* (1947):

- Increase of no-fault divorce
- Decreased number of children (population decay)
- Increased public disrespect for parents/parenthood
- Elimination of the real meaning of marriage
- Popularity of pessimistic doctrines about early heroes
- Breakdown of most inhibitions against adultery
- Revolts of youth against parents/parenthood
- Rapid rise and spread of juvenile delinquency
- Common acceptance of all forms of sexual perversions.

Whatever the reasons were that led to the breakdown of the Traditional Family, the real questions are: “So what? Why do I need to concern myself with Single Parents, Blended Families and Children of Divorce?”

THE VISION TO MEET THE NEED

“Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow” Isaiah 1:17.

“This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” James 1:27.

“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling” Psalm 68:5.

These three verses not only give us the biblical basis to “defend the orphan and plead for the widow,” they also give us the vision to meet the need of children of divorce and single parents (the modern-day orphans and widows). God does not say, “If you have the time and if it isn’t too inconvenient for you, I would like to suggest that you spend some time with children of divorce and single parents.” **God says to “defend the orphan and plead for the widow”!** The words “defend” and “plead” are not merely suggestions; they are commands!

The biblical command to “defend the orphan and plead for the widow” is given in the same verse as “keeping oneself unstained by the world.” They are both “undefiled religion in the sight of our God.” This means that the pursuit of holiness and ministry to children of divorce and single parents should both be priorities for the church. This should make some church leadership very nervous, knowing that they have not put ministry to children of divorce and single parents very high on their list of things to do!

When I first read those verses, I thought they were those types of verses that had little to do with today’s generation. Because they were irrelevant to today’s culture, I thought I could toss them aside like we conveniently do with other verses of Scripture when we really don’t want to take the time to ask what God would have us do to make His Word relevant in our modern world. I said to myself, “Orphans were children who were abandoned by both their parents and placed in orphanages during the early 1900s.” They made movies like *Oliver* about orphans, and surely today we have no orphans in our modern world.

As I thought about the word “orphan,” I also thought about the word “parent-less.” I began to realize that many children are “parent-less” when you consider death, divorce, separation, abuse, addiction and neglect. I formed a definition of a parent-less child to include “any child who does not live with both parents and who does not receive positive interaction from both parents.” Children who have experienced the loss of a parent through death, divorce or separation are “modern-day orphans.” Children who live in dysfunctional families experiencing abuse, addiction or neglect are also “modern-day orphans.”

HURDLES TO RECOVERY

In order to have an effective ministry with “modern-day orphans,” we need to touch these children where they hurt. Life changes will happen when we do so. I believe that children of divorce work through their recovery in stages. However, before they begin their recovery, it is imperative that they get through two hurdles as soon as possible.

The first hurdle is that children need to know that there are other kids who have divorced parents. They are not the only ones. When my parents divorced in 1965, I was the only one in my class who had divorced parents...or at least it seemed that way! Today, it is much more common for one-third of the children in the classroom to have divorced parents; yet kids still somehow think that they are the only ones. Getting children of divorce together in support groups will help them. It will also be a great avenue for them to hear other kids' feelings about the divorce and realize that they are not alone in what they are feeling.

The second hurdle is that kids need to know that the divorce is not their fault. This is a common misconception with all children of divorce. It stems from cause and effect logic. Children feel that if their parents have split up, then there must be a reason for it. If they have not been told otherwise, children will blame themselves, thinking that they must have done something to cause their parents to split up. Helping children understand that they are not responsible for decisions that others make will help.

Essential to this hurdle is for parents to tell the children why they broke up. Reasons like “Mommy and Daddy stopped loving each other,” or “We just could not get along anymore,” or “Things just didn't work out because we both changed too much” are probably not very convincing, and children will still think that it was their fault when these are the reasons given for the divorce. Even though the love might have stopped, communication was probably poor, conflict resolution did not exist, or changes in personalities occurred, I strongly suggest that parents tell their kids the truth about the real reasons for the divorce. I have found that reasons like adultery, abandonment, abuse and addiction are a good place to start when explaining to children what happened. You can leave out the names, dates, places and other specific details, but it is important to tell the truth.

The way a parent will tell a 7-year-old about adultery or addiction will definitely be different from how they tell a 14-year-old. The age of the child might determine how something is explained, but giving each child something concrete will help them avoid blaming themselves and thinking that the divorce was somehow their fault.

Now that they have made it past these two hurdles, it is time to begin the recovery process. We have formed “building blocks” that make up this recovery process. Most experts agree that this process takes time, anywhere from two to five years to work through.

The four building blocks in helping children of divorce work through their recovery are:

- HOW IT FEELS...the emotional and psychological issues
- THINGS THAT CHANGE...the practical and lifestyle issues
- NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS...the relational issues
- WHERE IS GOD WHEN I HURT?...the spiritual issues

HOW IT FEELS

When children experience HOW IT FEELS, the emotional and psychological issues, they work through the Stages of Grief made popular by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her work entitled, "On Death and Dying." Whether a child loses a parent through death or divorce, he still goes through the same stages of grief. The Stages of Grief are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Some people add another stage called Hope, but I like to call the final stage of recovery Forgiveness.

When you lose a parent through death, it is extremely difficult. What you are experiencing at the time of your loss is more painful than anything you have ever experienced. You move through grief recovery process without really knowing what is happening to you. The idea that time might take the pain away is an old wives' tale and it certainly is not very comforting at the moment. The only thing that helps is the comfort that God gives you to help ease your pain and the comfort from others who understand what you are feeling because they have experienced the same thing.

When a child loses a parent through divorce, it is just as difficult. The grief recovery process is the same in terms of the stages, but it gets messy, complicated and interrupted frequently. The difference is that both of the child's parents are still alive and have the potential to create more pain, every time there is a fight about child support, visitation, holidays, dating relationships, etc. This is the reason why the child might carry their pain into adulthood without breaking the cycle of divorce. It is due to the recovery process being interrupted by additional pain thrown in at great cost to the child's healing.

In addition to the stages of grief, children of divorce feel confused, afraid, helpless, hopeless, lonely, lost, rejected and worried. The goal during the first building block is to give them an opportunity to talk about their feelings and see that other kids share the same feelings. It is also important to explain to them that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

THINGS THAT CHANGE

When working through THINGS THAT CHANGE, the practical and lifestyle issues, children are worried about the following:

- Who will take care of me?
- Is there anything that is reliable or predictable?
- Are my parents crazy?
- Where is Dad/Mom going to live now?
- Are my parents going to sick, or worse?
- Will we have enough money now?
- Will I have to move to a new neighborhood?
- Will I have to change schools?
- Will I lose my friends too?
- Is Mom/Dad going to marry their boyfriend/girlfriend?

The issues that arise here are many. Four of the main issues for children of divorce to deal with in terms of lifestyle changes are:

1. Adjustment to living in a single-parent family: Mom and Dad live in different places. We're a single-parent family now!
2. Adjustment to having both parents in the workplace: Both of my parents have to work now. There's never enough money!
3. Adjustment to moving into a smaller living situation: I had to move to a new neighborhood. New friends and new schools!
4. Adjustment to visiting the non-custodial parent: I visit them every other weekend. I wish I could see my Dad/Mom more often!

The goal during this second building block is to give kids a chance to talk through some of the ways that their lives have changed: their families, their finances, their housing, their schools, their friends, and their relationships with their parents. Well-meaning adults can rush kids through these transitions, which will only increase the time it takes to make the transitions.

Kids need time to adjust to the ways that their lives have been drastically altered. Active listening will be a key element in making kids feel like they have permission to be upset that their lives have just been overturned, rather than the traditional approach of getting on with life as if nothing has really happened. They need support to help them adjust to these family transitions.

It is also important to explain to them that Jesus is the solid Rock and they can count on Him because God has said, "I will never leave you; I will never forget you." So the child can feel sure and say, "I will not be afraid because the Lord is my helper. People can't do anything to me" (Hebrews 13:5, 6).

NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Children build NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS (the relational issues). This process involves strangers becoming family members. It is strange, awkward and unnatural for a child's mother to have a boyfriend and his father to have a girlfriend. These new relationships include new parents (step-parents) and new siblings (step-brothers/sisters, half-brothers/sisters). If the life of the child of divorce has not gotten complicated before this, it will now! In order for kids to make these difficult relational adjustments, there are four things that will be helpful:

Allow enough time to build relationships. It is recommended that parents engage their children in the process of their dating when they have determined that the dating relationship has the potential to be long-term. Children need time to adjust to these new relationships, so it is to everyone's advantage that the kids get to know these "strangers becoming family members" as early as possible. Relationships take time to build, especially for kids faced with the idea of someone taking the place of one of their parents. The worst-case example would be for Mom to bring home her boyfriend to meet her children for the first time and announcing proudly, "Kids, meet your new Dad!"

The flip side to this approach could breed more pain for the children after they build close relationships with their parents' dating partners if their parents choose to break off the relationship. This is the reason that I recommend to parents to wait until they are sure that this relationship has a good potential to be permanent. It is also a risk to involve children in this process when parents – or their dating partners' – motives are not pure. Children easily get caught in the middle of manipulation. Regardless of these potential risks, if wisdom is used from the beginning, then involving kids in the process will pay off in the end and give this blended family a great chance at success.

Don't make comparisons with natural parents. Comparing dating partners and step-parents to natural parents is extremely hazardous to the emotional health of children. Children are already making these comparisons in their heads, and their friends are already asking them painful questions at school like, "Who do you like better, your real dad or your step-dad?" For parents to give in to their anger, frustration and bitterness by making the ex-spouse look bad in front of the children is a dangerous pattern to start. Even little comments will hurt the children. The best thing for parents to do is to stay neutral, hold their tongues and bring out the positive characteristics of the natural parents, step-parents and dating partners in order to avoid any comparisons.

Use wisdom when blending families. As stated earlier in this article, "it is being predicted that by the year 2000, the Blended Family will become the largest family grouping. This will be due to the fact that single parents will remarry more frequently than in the past when they stayed single."

The divorce rate is just under 50% for first-time marriages. The divorce rate is close to 80% for second marriages occurring within two years of the first divorce. These statistics must tell us something about taking it slower and using wisdom when blending families.

If most of the families in the year 2000 consisted of people who had been married twice or less, that would be one thing, but I am afraid that this will not be the case. The blended families in the year 2000 will be families that have had multiple attempts at marriage; and children will be the ones who suffer.

There will be a greater percentage of kids who live with two step-parents (one from a second marriage and the other from a third marriage). Children will have parents who are not related to them by blood. This is not the most alarming thing that could happen to kids considering the increase of children living in dysfunctional families where they experience some form of abuse or addiction. If a child is living in a family where they have loving parents (regardless of whether or not they are the natural parents), this is all we can hope for. The issue is not whether children have natural parents for their parents; the issue at stake here is how many parent figures does a child need to see before he/she finally gets one who will love him unconditionally, not abuse him, not neglect him through their own addictions, and provide some sort of consistency for the family by staying married to their spouse.

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).

Where would any of us be without forgiveness? We would be stuck with paying the penalty for our multitude of shortcomings. It is amazing to me that when we talk about divorce and the pain associated with it that we somehow remove verses like the one above from our Bibles. We act as if we have the right to justified anger. This faulty thinking is the cause of creating more pain after the initial grief process associated with loss. We have no right to bitterness, rage, anger, slander or malice. We are commanded to be kind, compassionate and forgiving to those who have not been kind, compassionate and forgiving to us. Much of the practical advice on helping the modern-day orphan can be broken down into these two short verses. It is wise for us to obey them!

WHERE IS GOD?

Where is God? The spiritual issues are the final building block in helping children of divorce work through their recovery. It involves explaining to children the biblical purpose for *suffering* and *comfort*.

SUFFERING – Romans 5:1-5: “And we are happy because of the hope we have in sharing God’s glory. And we also have joy with our troubles because we know that troubles produce patience; patience produces character; and character produces hope. And this hope will never disappoint us, because God has poured out his love to fill our hearts. God gave us his love through the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us.”

COMFORT – 2 Corinthians 1:3-7: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the Father who is full of mercy. And he is the God of all comfort. He comforts us every time we have trouble, so that we can comfort others when they have trouble. We can comfort them with the same comfort that God gives us. We share in the many sufferings of Christ. In the same way, much comfort comes to us through Christ.”

The final building block also involves a discussion about the difference between *real needs* and *felt needs*.

Children of divorce have a *felt need* to be given an opportunity to talk to other kids who have gone through similar experiences in order to find comfort in the fact that they are not alone (Jesus wants to heal their hurts).

Children of divorce have a *real need* to hear the message that they matter to God; that God wants to be their father and adopt them into His family (Jesus wants to cleanse their sin).

To address one of these needs without the other does them a disservice. The vision of our ministry to children of divorce is to integrate these two needs into one: To change lives by touching kids where they hurt. God has promised to give them comfort to help ease the pain on earth. God has not promised to take away the pain until we get to heaven.

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’ (Revelation 21:3, 4).

PRACTICAL HELP FOR THE MODERN-DAY ORPHAN

Below are nine practical suggestions as you help children of divorce become better adjusted to their parents' divorce.

1. Spend one-on-one time with children of divorce. They need this individualized attention from adults. They have been put on hold during their parents' separation and divorce. This is helpful for both the acting-out and shy, withdrawn child. They will respond to the investment of undistracted, fully-devoted, one-on-one time that you spend with them.
2. Give them positive attention instead of negative attention. Because they have this "love-hunger" for attention, they will seek it in whatever way they can get it. By giving them enough positive attention, this will decrease their negative attention-seeking behavior. Give them individual special attention through helpful "jobs." This might include preparation before an activity, running errands or cleaning up afterwards. This gives you time for personal interaction and also helps them get attention in a positive way. Compliment their efforts so that they feel effective and useful.
3. Know their family backgrounds. You can't help someone you do not know. Most of the behavior problems that happen in the classroom or other structured settings could be avoided by the leadership knowing the family backgrounds of the children attending. Being a child of divorce does not give the children license to misbehave, but knowing what is going on at home might be helpful in how a leader intervenes or better yet, prevents the misbehavior. Encouraging kids to share a little about their home lives will give you insight into their behavior.
4. Acknowledge their emotions. Give kids the opportunity to talk about their feelings and acknowledge the fact that you are listening to them. When listening, be non-judgmental and be prepared to hear them complain about their parents. Don't negate these feelings; rather, allow them to vent their frustration, realizing that they may have no one else who can listen neutrally. Don't feel like you have to provide answers all the time. Many times there are no answers because it is all out of the child's control. Let them know that you care about them, that you are willing to listen to them at any time and then pray for them. Pray for their adjustment to all the changes and hurt around them. Some of their feelings might not be very pretty, but it is better to validate their emotions than judge them for having "bad" feelings. You can talk about forgiveness when it is appropriate.
5. Get them in touch with other children of divorce. The success of any self-help program is to get people together with other of similar problems in order to provide support and encouragement. It is the difference between sympathy (feeling sorry for someone) and empathy (knowing how they feel from personal experience). Kids respond well to knowing that they are not alone, that there are other kids who have divorced parents, and that their feelings are normal and shared by others.
6. Make appropriate referrals when needed. You can't be superman! When reactions seem overly severe or children reveal issues that are beyond your

ability to provide the help they need, try to involve the help of a qualified, trained professional. This might be a pastor, a counselor within the church, a guidance counselor at school or a psychologist.

These areas in question might include: Abuse (physical, sexual or verbal) or addiction (alcohol, drugs, food). Be sure to recommend this diplomatically to the custodial parent. Try not to get caught in the middle between the two parents. When you have to, become the child's advocate for a more calm and loving atmosphere.

7. Be a Big Brother/Sister to a Single-Parent family. Single parents try so hard to be two parents in one. We need to give them a break from this impossible responsibility by calling upon energetic and empathetic adults to spend time with kid from single-parent families who have no positive male/female role models in their families. This will meet a big need for those single parents. Plan activities as a group at first; it will provide a non-threatening atmosphere for kids to build positive relationships with Christian adult role models. Be careful to screen those wanting to be involved for improper or impure reasons (single parents, big brothers or big sisters). The last thing these kids need is for someone else to hurt them.
8. Provide resources for their parents. Begin a resource network for single parents and blended families. There are plenty of needs, including: food, clothing, financial, 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 to those who are in need. Most of these parents will not come and ask for the 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 children of divorce. There are three groups of people: those who will benefit from your services, others who will not benefit, and still others who are unable to be helped. It is this third group of people who will frustrate the rescuer. No matter what you do, it won't be good enough. Authentic change can only happen when a person makes good use of your resources and help by being willing to make things different.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Mission of the CENTER is:

To educate, train and resource the Body of Christ (the Church) to encourage, equip and empower single-parent families to live transformed lives.

The Mission of KIDS HOPE is:

To bring about emotional, relational and spiritual hope & healing to children living in single-parent or blended families.

Gary has been involved in starting ministries to single-parent families at several local churches. He received his Ordination to ministry from Woodland Park Community Church in Woodland Park, Colorado on July 9, 2000.

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A book written by Kids, for Kids and about Kids

KIDS HOPE FOR CHILDREN

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KIDS HOPE FOR TEENS

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Gary has worked extensively with children and families with special needs, including grief recovery, residential treatment, foster care, adoption, and family counseling.

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Gary became a child of divorce in 1965 and experienced the tragic death of his mother in 1994. He is committed to helping others find hope from troubles in their life. His life verse is James 1:27 "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God & Father, to visit widows and orphans in their distress."

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