



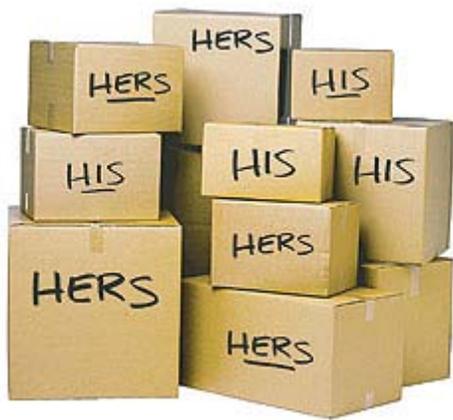
HOW DO YOU MINISTER TO PARENTS WHO ARE COHABITING?

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By Dale Hudson

08/28/2013

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a site primarily about ministering to children from divorced and separated parents. This can include kids living with single parents for a variety of reasons. However, there are other cultural trends which pose similar issues that those of us who work with kids should be familiar with. More and more often in our society, children are born to parents who are cohabiting but not married. These relationships are much more likely to end in separation raising the same issues for their children as divorced parents. In this guest article, Dale Hudson offers some advice on how to minister to cohabiting couples with kids.



A recent report from the Institution for America Values shows the increase of unmarried parents and the effects it has on children.

In the second half of the twentieth century, divorce was the event most likely to undercut the quality and stability of children's family lives. But not any more.

Divorce rates have come down since peaking in the early 1980s. Children who are now born to married couples are actually more likely to grow up with both of their parents than children who were born at the height of the divorce revolution of the 70-80's.

Today, the rise of cohabiting households with children is the largest unrecognized threat to the quality and stability of children's family lives. In fact, because of the growing prevalence of cohabitation, which has risen fourteen-fold since 1970, today's children are much more likely to spend time in a cohabiting household than they are to see their parents divorce.

Now, approximately 24 percent of the nation's children are born to cohabiting couples, which means that more children are currently born to cohabiting couples than to single mothers. Another 20 percent or so of children spend time in a cohabiting household with an unrelated adult at some point later in their childhood, often after their parents' marriage breaks down. This means that more than four in ten children are exposed to a cohabiting relationship.

Children are less likely to thrive in cohabiting households, compared to intact, married families. On many social, educational, and psychological outcomes, children in cohabiting households do significantly worse than children in intact, married families, and about as poorly as children living in single-parent families. And when it comes to abuse, recent federal data indicate that children in cohabiting households are markedly more likely to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused than children in both intact, married families and single-parent families



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Family instability is generally bad for children. In recent years, family scholars have turned their attention to the impact that transitions into and out of marriage, cohabitation, and single parenthood have upon children. This report shows that such transitions, especially multiple transitions, are linked to higher reports of school failure, behavioral problems, drug use, and loneliness, among other outcomes. And the research indicates that children who are born to married parents are the least likely to be exposed to family instability, and to the risks instability poses to the emotional, social, and educational welfare of children.

Cohabiting couples who have a child together are more than twice as likely to break up before their child turns twelve, compared to couples who are married to one another. Thus, one of the major reasons that children's lives are increasingly turbulent is that more and more children are being born into or raised in cohabiting households that are much more fragile than married families.

Children in cohabiting families are 4 times more likely to experience serious emotional problems compared to children in families headed by married biological or adoptive parents. God's plan for the intact, biological, married family remains the gold standard for family life. Children are most likely to thrive—economically, socially, and psychologically— in this family form.

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So how can we effectively minister to parents who are cohabiting?

Tip #1 - Be about redemption. If you are reaching your community, you will have parents who are cohabiting attending your church. Do they feel welcome? The church should be a hospital where parents can find redemption...not a museum where only perfect families are on display.

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Tip #2 - Speak the truth in love. There has to be a balance between love and truth. It's like the two wings of a plane. One won't fly without the other. Communicate God's truth about marriage with a heart of love and compassion. When people know you truly care for them, it will open their heart to receive the truth.

Tip #3 - Establish guidelines. It is important to have clear guidelines in areas that are related to cohabiting. Will you allow parents who are cohabiting to serve in Children's Ministry? Will you allow parents who are cohabiting to participate in child dedication? These are questions that each church must address and answer for themselves. The Biblical reasons behind your guidelines should be clearly communicated.

Tip #4 - Have pathways in place. When you challenge parents to line up with God's Word, it's important to have pathways in place that will help them get there. When you explain "why" be ready to show them "how." Provide them next steps such as a prep-for-marriage course or counseling.

Tip #5 - Work hand-in-hand with adult ministries. Partner with adult ministries to create the pathways mentioned above. Many times, the first time parents will share they are cohabiting will come through their interaction with children's ministry. Being able to easily connect them with adult ministries is vital.

When you minister to parents who are cohabiting, it can be difficult at times. Some will pull away when they hear the truth...but others will follow God's Word and you will see their lives and family changed forever. I've seen both happen...and had the joy of seeing parents who were cohabiting get married. Just remember, we can't change anyone's heart...only God can do that. It's simply our job to speak God's truth in love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dale Hudson has been in Children's Ministry for over 24 years. He is the Director of Children's Ministry at Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach, Florida. Christ Fellowship has 6 campuses and ministers to over 19,000 people on weekends. Dale leads a Children's Ministry staff team of over 40 and a volunteer team of over 1,700. Dale's passion is helping children and families discover God's life-changing grace. He is also passionate about encouraging and equipping Children's Ministry leaders. Dale's greatest joy is his family. He and his wife, Pamela, have been married for 24 years. They have two sons.

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