



SUNDAY MORNING STRATEGIES: FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

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By Wayne D. Stocks

September 30 and November 18, 2013 (Originally published in two parts)



Welcome back as we continue our “Sunday Morning Strategies” series designed to help you to accommodate children of divorce and children from single parent homes in your Sunday morning children’s ministry. For the last several installments, we have looked at different strategies for dealing with parents from divorced homes. This week we are going to look at developing relationships with children of divorce.

The Importance of Relationships

Relationships are key to any type of ministry. Ultimately, our goal is that the kids in our ministry will form a relationship with Jesus Christ. Toward that end, we endeavor to form relationships with these kids and to afford them opportunities to form relationships with one another. The relationships we develop with the children in our ministries allow us to speak into their lives and to model Christian living for them.

The Difficulty of Forming Relationships With Children of Divorce

As children’s ministers, we are used to forming relationships with kids. For many of us, it just comes naturally and that’s one of the things that drew us to children’s ministry in the first place. We just have a knack for getting along with kids and knowing the right time to say the right thing. We’ve dealt with the crying child who doesn’t want mom or dad to drop them off for children’s church. But, forming a relationship with a child of divorce is different, and oftentimes much more difficult. In this article, we will look at why relationships with children of divorce are different than other relationships and what you can do to begin the process of nourishing those relationships.

When it comes to children from divorced or separated homes, you are likely to find that forming a relationship with them is harder than you’re used to. This can be for various reasons:

- **Trust Issues.** Children of divorce are likely to have trust issues. After all, the two people they have trusted the most in their life (mom and dad) have violated their trust in breaking apart the only family they have ever known. You have likely never done anything to violate their trust, but you will be forced to overcome their trust issues if you want to build a relationship.
- **Anticipated Let Down.** Children from divorced or separated homes assume that adults will let them down. Perhaps it is a result of underlying trust issues. Maybe it is because of the pattern that the adults in their lives have modeled for them. Whatever the cause, you can assume that when you start to build a relationship with these kids that they will assume that you will let them down eventually too.





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- **Guarded Emotions.** One of the biggest problems faced by many children of divorce is the inability to express their emotions. Sometimes they don't even recognize the emotions that they are feeling. Often times, this results in children of divorce who are guarded in the emotions that they are willing to express. After all, they surmise, "if I don't share my emotions, I can't be hurt."
- **Deep thinkers.** Children of divorce face deep questions about their lives and their faith. Many times they aren't interested in many of the more fun-loving or frivolous things that many kids engage in. This can make building a relationship with them even more difficult.
- **Jaded/Cynical.** These kids have been dealt a rough hand early in life, and many times it leaves them a bit jaded and cynical about life in general. Breaking through those walls can be a significant barrier to forming a relationship.

But, just because forming relationships with children of divorce poses some unique challenges doesn't mean that it's impossible. With enough planning and by being strategic, you can form relationships with children of divorce that will allow you to speak into their lives and help them through this time in their lives. The remainder of this article addresses seven things you need to do in order to overcome the barriers and develop lasting relationships with children of divorce and children from separated homes.

Know Your Role

In trying to develop a relationship with children of divorce, it is important that you are clear about exactly what your role is. You cannot, nor should you try to, replace a parent who has left and/or abandoned the child. You can be a friend, an advocate, a teacher, a role model, a confidant and so much more, but you will never replace that missing parents. It is important to accept that and establish those boundaries from the get go.

When dealing with hurting kids, it is natural to want to make the pain go away. Unfortunately, that is neither your role nor the best thing for the child of divorce. Dealing with pain is key to grieving process, and one of the worse things you can do is try to "happy up" the child of divorce.

Be Patient

In working with children of divorce, you must be prepared to sign up for the long haul. The effects of divorce on kids have been shown to be long-term. The old adage that kids should recover from divorce couldn't be further from the truth. Every child is different. And, every child will react differently to divorce. One thing is constant though – divorce hurts. Some kids will react negatively right away. Other kids will seem fine with everything and the effects of the divorce won't be seen for months or even years.





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As an adult working with a child of divorce, you should be prepared to answer the same questions and deal with the same issues over and over again. Don't assume that just because you have helped a child of divorce deal with an issue once that you won't have to go back and revisit the issue – maybe over and over again. You'll also need patience to deal with the raw emotions exhibited by many children of divorce. Don't be surprised if, from time to time, the intensity of those emotions are sometimes directed at you.

The other things that you will find unique about children of divorce, compared say to others kids you have known that have grieved the loss of a parent, is that children of divorce will pass through the grieving process multiple times as they age and as they find themselves dealing with different aspects of their parents' divorce.

As an adult who desires to help a child deal with divorce, you have to be prepared to hang in for the long haul. You have to convince the child, through your actions and not your words, that you aren't going anywhere and that you intend to be there for them for a while. Only by demonstrating that you intend to walk with them through their circumstances will they feel safe enough to break down the walls and let you in.

Know Your Kids

In order to develop a relationship with any child, you need to get to know them. They aren't interested in generic conversations. They want to know that you know them and are interested in them. The child of divorce is no different. Get to know the child and his family. Ask questions and pay attention to the answers. If you have trouble retaining information, write it down. The more you get to know the child, the less likely you are to need to refer back to your notes, but they can be a critical tool in the beginning. Things as simple as understanding a child's situation and not assuming that they share a last name with the person who brought them can help to open the door to a future relationship with the child that will allow you to speak into their life. The fact of the matter is, you won't know about the children in your ministry if you are afraid to ask. Have a system in place to collect basic information about the kids and use conversation to find out the rest.

Develop Communication Skills

Relationships are built on communication, and never will your communication skills be tested as much as they will in forming relationships with children from disrupted homes. That means that you are going to need to take some time to hone your communication skills. The first step in becoming a better communicator is to learn how to be a better listener. Practice active listening. Employ techniques like repeating back what you have heard to make sure that the person who is talking knows that you are listening. So many times when these hurting kids cross our path they simply want someone who is willing to take the time to listen to them. Listening can be a gateway to a strong and lasting relationship with these kids.





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Communication also takes time. In the hustle and bustle of a “normal” Sunday morning (is there such a thing?) it is easy to lose sight of the fact that God calls us to relationships not to programs and not to curricula. Make time on your Sunday mornings to engage in one-on-one conversations with these kids. Knowing that you are willing to talk to them in the midst of everything else going on will foster the types of relationships you are trying to build.

When it comes specifically to communicating with children from disrupted homes, there are a couple of things you will want to keep in mind:

1. Don't initiate a conversation about the divorce or separation of a child's parents in front of the child's friends. Chances are they already feel like a bit of an outcast and your attempts to build a relationship may be seen as embarrassing or off-putting if done at the wrong time or place.
2. Don't force the conversation. Allow kids to talk about things that might be bothering them in their own time and at their own pace.
3. Don't ask painful questions. Your role is to provide a listening ear if the child chooses to speak to you about what is bothering them – not to force the issue.
4. Don't try to “happy up” the child. For a child from a disrupted homes, dealing with the pain is critical to moving past it and moving on. If your goal is to help them cover up that pain with a happy façade you will hinder their long-term healing.

Foster a Relational Environment

If you are interested in forming the types of deep long-term relationships that will allow you to speak into the lives of these kids, you need to make relationship central to your ministry. Make sure that you value and celebrate relationships as a core value of your ministry. Four types of relationships should mark all ministry that you do:

1. The child's relationship with God;
2. The child's relationship with you and other leaders in your ministry;
3. The children's relationships with one another; and
4. Intergenerational relationships with other adults in the church outside the child's family and outside of your ministry.

Point Them to an Eternal Relationship

No matter how hard we work and how much we teach these kids and minister to them, there is only one relationship that can bring them ultimate hope and healing – a relationship with their Heavenly Father. We must work with a sense of urgency in our children's ministries to point children to Jesus Christ. We must faithfully present them with the gospel of our Lord and Savior and live it out in front of them. When they fall



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away from the church, we must ensure that we have done all we can do in every moment we have with them to point them to the one relationship that will never fail them and never let them down.

Follow Up

It is not enough to just form a relationship. Especially with children from disrupted families who are statistically more likely to fall away from church, we need to make sure that we have a system in place to follow up on those kids who don't come back to our churches. Whether it is small group leaders, or the children's pastor or a specially designated person in your ministry, make sure that somebody is following up with every single child who stops coming to your ministry. This is particularly important as children move from one age group to another as this is a prime time to lose track of kids who have fallen away from the church or stopped coming because their parents don't bring them anymore.

Building relationships takes time. Building relationships with children from disrupted homes requires even more time, more persistence and more tenacity. Take the steps in your life and your ministry to allow yourself the margin to build relationships with these kids. In the end, you will both benefit from those relationships.