



KNOWING THE FAMILY'S SITUATION

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

10/21/2011



This week I'd like to take a bit of a detour from ministering to the child of divorce. Why? Because ministering to the children means knowing something about their single parent and understanding the family situation.

Recently a leader of a divorce support group contacted me. She has a lady from another church in her group and she had received a call from this participant's pastor. While the pastor was appreciative that my friend's church was running DivorceCare he was concerned about the lady from his church. It seemed as though he thought his congregant was playing the system. While some single parents do "play the system", my friend knew this lady was struggling in many areas of her life. My friend explained this lady was in a crisis and barely surviving.

The minister and the elders in his church thought the lady needed some help, and they had visited her home. He found that she had plenty of food, a large screen TV, a computer and several other items that he thought were "unnecessary items." My friend asked this pastor what types of foods were

in the home. She asked if it was possible the children needed the computer for homework purposes. She went onto explain that this particular single mom didn't have a clue about budgeting. She purchased items on a whim, such as huge amounts of canned goods and fast foods.

Some single parent become overwhelmed with the divorce settlement and since their spouse had always handled the finances they may spend the money on things their children want such as a large screen TV. Or, it could be that the spouse that left intentionally left the large screen TV for the children. Other divorcing parents feel guilty and tempt to soothe the guilty feelings by purchasing extravagant gifts. While some single parents start out with nothing, many others are awarded items through the divorce courts, or even remain stuck with items that have large loans associated with them.

My friend explained that if the church wanted to help this single mom, they might find someone that could walk her through setting up a budget. The church could either purchase a few perishable items, such as milk, eggs and meat or get her a store gift card. Someone from the church might look into helping her get her children on the free lunch program at school. While we might think this is a no brainer, for some single parents free lunches are not within their realm of thought. They might be so overwhelmed with the loss of a spouse and the income that went with it, they literally can't think beyond the moment.





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When a person becomes a single parent because of divorce, it can be devastating. I know because I walked that journey myself. After much study and working with single parents, I have come to believe single parents can be divided into three distinct stages. While I won't take the time to go into all three stages here, I do want to discuss the first stage because this is the stage that deeply affects the children coming to your church.

The first stage is crisis. These are the single parents that are barely surviving; their life is in crisis. They are the single parents that many ministers look at as "needy". Yes, it's true; they are needy at this stage of life. However, if you can help these single parents get through this stage then you will see emotionally healthy single parent families emerging later on. And when you help these parents you help their children.

This stage can last for a few months, it can last several years, and it unfortunately lasts forever for a few people. Healing takes time and it takes an active group of people supporting the single parent and family. Sometimes it means several people coming alongside the single parent for a season of time. It doesn't mean that you, as a children's minister or volunteer, have to spend a lot of time devoted to one family. It does mean that you need to find church members that can help in various areas.

Some things that many single parents might need help with during this crisis stage of life are:

- **Love and support from those around them.** They don't need someone to ask a lot of questions about what happened.
- **Nonjudgmental attitudes.** Unless you were raised in a single parent household or have been a single parent, it's difficult to comprehend all that goes into parenting alone. It's easy to project one's assumptions onto the person struggling to parent alone.
- **Help finding appropriate housing.**
- **Help with the purchase of food, school supplies, cleaning supplies.** While some women have difficulty with budgeting, some men have problems with knowing appropriate cleaning supplies to purchase. Things like cleaning supplies can prove to be very expensive when you are trying to come up with enough money just to feed your kids.
- **Help with accessing food stamps.** It can be frightening and embarrassing to go through the process of figuring out how to access government assistance. Sometimes just having someone accompany the single parent will be a much-needed relief.
- **Help with accessing quality child care on a tight budget.**
- **Help accessing government child care assistance.** Most states have government assistance programs that are set up on a sliding scale and some programs provide free care. There are usually criteria and standards the child care must meet in order to obtain reimbursement from the





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- government, so be sure to ask for an approved list of child care programs. Then, help the single parent by visiting various programs and helping them secure a placement for their children.
- **Baby sitters that can step in when there is a sick child and the single parent must work.** Sitters are also needed when the single parent has to work late and someone is needed to pick up children from child care before they close. Sometimes single parents need someone to pick up a child from school when they become ill.
 - **Access to mental health experts.** This is especially true if a child has a diagnosed behavioral disorder, emotional issue or has been abused in any way.

This list can go on and on but the main thing to take time to figure out what the single parent needs.

If your church has a support group for divorced people, steer the single parent into that direction. If there is a single parent Bible class, direct the single parent to that class. One word of caution, single parents do not belong in general "singles" classes. Single parents have a different agenda as they face raising children by themselves.

Earlier I mentioned that, as single parents navigate parenting by themselves, I believed they go through different stages. These stages can be grouped into three distinct phases - surviving, transitioning and emerging. I have written about each of these stages:

1. For more on stage one, "The Surviving Stage" surviving the crisis, go to www.hlp4.com/?q=node/142
2. To read about stage two, "The Transitioning Stage" moving from crisis to reality, see www.hlp4.com/?q=node/143
3. Stage three, "The Emerging Stage" moving from reality to becoming a healthy single parent, can be found at, www.hlp4.com/?q=node/144

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda's website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\) \[http://www.hlp4.com\]](http://www.hlp4.com). Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at Linda@hlp4.com.

