



WHY OUR CHURCH SHOULD MINISTER TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

By Wayne D. Stocks

05/30/2012 through 06/04/2012



At Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, one of our basic beliefs is that the church should be a place of support and healing for children of divorce. As I was driving home last week praying and pondering the idea of starting a support group for children of divorce at my local church (I currently volunteer in a program sponsored by another church), I started to think about what I might say to the members of our church in an effort to get them behind a new ministry, and possibly even volunteer for a ministry, aimed at helping children of divorce to heal. The program we are thinking of starting is Divorce Care 4 Kids (DC4K), but I believe the principles presented below can apply to any church pondering any sort of divorce support group for kids.

I have localized some of the statistics and information presented below for my church in Gahanna, Ohio, but I have tried to include references to the appropriate sources so that you can customize the information if necessary for your church and geographic area. I have also included extensive footnotes regarding the statistics presented in this report as I find there is a significant amount of misinformation when it comes to this issue. Here is the text of the speech that came to my mind.

Thank you for this opportunity to talk to you today about an issue which has been heavy on my heart for the last couple of years and should be of urgent importance to us as the people of God and His ambassadors to this community and the world around us. It is an issue which has, in many respects, gone largely unnoticed and untended to by so many churches. The issue is one of ministering to children of divorce.

What Is the Issue With Children of Divorce?

Recent government statistics tell us that roughly 60% of children live with their married biological (or adoptive) parents. That means that 2 in every 5 children live in a family comprised of something other than married biological parents. Of this 40% (nearly 30 million children), 14% live in stepfamilies and 67% live with a single or cohabiting parent¹.





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Each year in this country, more than one million couples divorce². The church is not immune to this divorce wave. Recent studies indicate that the divorce rate among born again Christians is almost identical to that of non-Christians³.

Many times, children become the unwitting victims of these divorces. Since 1972, nearly 1,000,000 children each year have suffered through the divorce of their parents⁴. Statistics tell us that nearly half of children who live through the divorce of their biological parents will also suffer through the dissolution of a parent's second marriage⁵, and ten percent will live through three or more divorces involving their parents⁶. In fact, divorce has become so commonplace in our society that statistics show that the presence of children in a marriage no longer inhibits parents from getting a divorce⁷. These divorces leave kids with emotionally detached parents at best and oftentimes with no contact at all with at least one parent. Ten to twenty-five percent of children of divorce have no contact with their non-custodial parent within 2-3 years of the divorce⁸.

How Does Divorce Impact Children?

The impacts of divorce on children are significant and long lasting. Children of divorce routinely experience:

- Anger
- Fear and Anxiety
- Chaos
- Confusion
- Denial
- Depression
- Embarrassment
- Grief
- Guilt
- Hostility
- Insecurity
- Loneliness
- Powerlessness
- Rejection
- Sadness
- Stress
- A sense of being split between two worlds
- Loss of childhood
- Loss of friends
- Loss of parents



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The impacts are more than just emotional though. Studies show that children of divorce are:

- Less likely to attend church⁹.
- Viewed by their peers as less pleasant to be around¹⁰.
- More likely to struggle at school¹¹.
- More likely to be aggressive¹².
- More likely to find themselves in a state of poverty following the divorce¹³.
- More likely to drop out of high school¹⁴.
- More likely to have children out of wedlock¹⁵.
- More likely to engage in criminal behavior¹⁶.
- Less likely to match their parents educational and economic achievements¹⁷.
- More likely to need professional psychological help in any given year¹⁸.
- More likely to exhibit health problems and suffer injuries, asthma, headaches, and speech defects¹⁹.
- Likely to reject the faith of their parents²⁰.
- More likely to engage in alcohol and drug abuse²¹.
- At an increased risk of committing suicide²².

Studies have shown that there is a “sleeper effect” in many children of divorce. In those children who appear to adjust well at the time of the divorce, many will suffer impacts of the divorce 5, 10 or 15 years following the divorce. There are several documented long lasting impacts of divorce on children including:

- Adult children of divorce are more likely to be lonely, unhappy, anxious and insecure²³.
- Adult children of divorce are less likely to get married when they become adults (only 60% get married)²⁴.
- Adult children of divorce are more likely to get divorced if they do get married²⁵.
- Adult children of divorce are less likely to have children than adults from intact families²⁶.
- Numerous studies have documented lasting effects of divorce up to ten or more years following the divorce of parents²⁷.
- Children of Divorce are more likely to develop worse relationship with parents and seek out psychological help later in life²⁸.
- Some studies show that, on average, children of divorce live shorter life spans than children from intact families²⁹.

Does the Church Need to Get Involved?

Children of divorce are thrown into a torrent of change and overwhelming emotions. At a time in their lives when they need a support system the most, their natural support system – their family – is falling apart. Unlike



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the death of a parent where friends, family and the community rally behind children, children of divorce are left without any semblance of support.

In her groundbreaking book *Between Two Worlds*, Elizabeth Marquardt conducted a study of hundreds of children of divorce. She found that, for children who were regularly attending a church or synagogue at the time of their parents' divorce, two-thirds said that no-one from clergy or the congregation reached out to them during their parents' divorce³⁰. An older study found that less than 10% of children of divorce had any support from adults other than relatives during the acute phase of the divorce³¹.

Should the Church Get Involved?

There is a clear and pressing need for someone to stand in the gap for these children of divorce, but is the church the appropriate entity to do that? To the answer that question, we must turn to God's Word. One of the best known scriptures when it comes to divorce is found in the book of Malachi. You may have heard it before:

"I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel... [Malachi 5:16a, NIV]

There is some disagreement about the correct translation of the verse from the original language, but regardless of how you translate this particular verse, I believe the fact is irrefutable – God does hate divorce. He does not, however, hate the divorcee. However, that is not the point today. I actually want to focus your attention on the verse preceding this one for some insight into one of the reasons why God hates divorce. Malachi 5:15 tells us:

Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. [Malachi 5:15, NIV]

God intended a man and woman to be married and become one in both flesh and spirit. We see this from the very beginning of the Book of Genesis. We know that one of the reasons God created marriage was as a model, albeit an imperfect one, of the relationship between Christ and the church. This verse tells us that another reason God created marriage was because He was "seeking Godly offspring" as the result of the marriage. The clear implication here, given the subsequent verse, is that divorce negatively impacts this goal. One of the reasons why God hates divorce is because it impedes the development of Godly children. When marriage falls apart as a means of creating such godly offspring, something or someone else must step up to fill this void. Of course, God is sovereign, and He could simply do it Himself, but like so many other things He chooses to work through human agents – you and me.

James, the brother of Jesus, makes the point very clear:





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Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. [James 1:27, NIV]

Children of divorce are our modern day orphans, and it is time for the church to stand in the gap for them and step up to minister to their needs.

Listen to the word of Jesus:

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' [Matthew 25:34-40, NIV]

It is way past time for the church to step up and take care of the "least of these" when it comes to children of divorce.

The Need For A Local Program?

The idea of ministering to children of divorce is something that must be addressed by churches in general, but there is a very real, and very immediate, need for such a ministry in our own church and in our own community.

At a normal weekend at our church, we have about 250 kids in the nursery up through high school ministry. Based on the statistics presented earlier, that means that statistically 100 of those kids do not live with their married biological parents. 15 live in stepfamilies and 66 live with a single parent, and that's just in our church. In Gahanna, Ohio (the city where our church is located), there are 8,899 kids (based on the 2010 U.S. Census data)³². Given the national statistics, that means approximately 526 children in our community live in step-families and 2,365 live in single-parent homes. If we take that one step further to include our surrounding communities (excluding Columbus)³³, that's a total of 2,200 kids living in step-families and 10,790 living in single-parent homes. Statistically, the city of Columbus has nearly 11,500 kids living in step families and over 51,000 living in single parent homes³⁴. There are an overwhelming number of children in our church, in our community and in surrounding communities who need our help.





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However, a quick search of Divorce Care 4 Kids online shows only 10 churches within 30 miles of Columbus that offer a DC4K support group for kids, and only one in the geographic region I gave you statistics for earlier (Gahanna and surrounding cities excluding Columbus). By contrast, 30 churches offer the adult equivalent known Divorce Care. A quick Google search reveals several more Divorce Recovery type ministries for adults throughout the city. A similar Google search did not reveal any additional similar ministries for kids.

The number of hurting children in our neighborhoods and surrounding neighborhoods is phenomenal, and vehicles for healing are beyond limited. This all points to the overwhelming need for ministry to children of divorce in our area.

What Can the Church Do?

The answer to the question, “What Can the Church Do?” is nothing. Nothing, that is, apart from the power of Christ. With Christ though, the church can offer these kids a means of lasting healing and hope, and that is a relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Psalm 34:18 reminds us:

The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. [Psalms 34:18 ESV]

At Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, that is the verse that our entire mission is based on. The statistics and outcomes cited above can seem hopeless and lead to despair, but God reminds us that He is never far away from these kids. Out of the darkness of the most life-shattering event of their young lives, we can offer to them a Father who will never leave them, a Great Physician who can heal all their wounds and a Savior who can meet their eternal needs.

When the enemy whispers in their ear, and he will, that “this is all your fault,” we must be there to remind them that they are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do the works he has laid before us. When the enemy convinces the child of divorce that there is no hope and that all is lost, we must be there to remind them Jesus is a God of Hope and the source of our hope. When the child of divorce feels abandoned by their earthly parent(s), it is our job to remind them in our words and our actions that God has said, “never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” When a child’s trust is dashed by a parent who has walked away, the church must be there to remind them that we have a Heavenly Father who is the same yesterday, today and forever. When a child of divorce feels overwhelmed and wonders if things will ever get better, we must be the hands and feet and Jesus Christ.

In order to adequately serve these kids, there are many things that the church must do ranging from supporting marriage and single parents to remembering these kids in our prayers and programming. All of these represent long term systemic changes both in attitude and practice. One of the immediate things we can do, though, is to begin a Divorce Care 4 Kids program to serve and support kids who are currently, or have recently, suffered through the divorce of their parents.





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What is DC4K?

Divorce Care 4 Kids is a 13 week program to help children of divorce from ages 5 through 12 to heal from the pain caused by a separation or divorce. DC4K provides a safe place for children to process what they going through, learn techniques for dealing with the stress and emotions of divorce and learn that “God’s love strengthens them and helps them turn their sadness to hope and their anger to joy.”

Each session is filled with activities and experiences specifically designed for children of divorce. These activities include games, crafts, discussion times, role playing, journaling, music, videos and much more. Ultimately, DC4K focuses on the healing power of a relationship with Christ and includes bible verses and stories individually selected for their impact on children of divorce.

Weekly topics include:

- What is happening to my family?
- Facing my anger,
- I am not alone,
- Developing new relationships,
- It’s not my fault,
- Forgiveness,
- Growing up and closer to God,
- And many more.

The focus of DC4K is on building relationships that will help the child of divorce to heal. This includes, first and foremost, the child’s relationship with God, but it also includes the relationship between the leaders and children in the ministry and the relationships between the children themselves.

What Can You Do?

There are four groups of people who can help us as we launch this new DC4K ministry here at our church, and if you are willing to help in any of the following ways, you can let us know about that by [insert means of contact here]:

1. *Parents who are divorcing or have divorced:* Sign your children up for this program! We know that your schedules are busy, but this program will help both you and your child in the short and long run.
2. *Friends, neighbors, co-workers, parents, brothers and sisters of parents who are divorcing or have divorced:* Let your friends know about this program for their children. So many times, an adult going





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through a divorce can get caught up with their own emotional issues and lose sight of what is best for their children. They don't do this intentionally or maliciously, but a friend or family member who can lovingly point them in the direction of something that can help their kids will be greatly appreciated.

3. *Those who have a heart for helping children of divorce and have a gift for working with children:* There is a need for volunteers to help in this ministry. If you are inclined to work with children, we have a need for "Safe Keepers" (the name for leaders in the DC4K program). These children are in desperate need of attention, and the more leaders we have, the more attention each child will get, and the more children we can help. We believe it is an honor and a calling to minister to children of divorce which comes with a great degree of responsibility. Accordingly, all potential Safe Keepers are carefully screened. Ideal volunteers may include:
 - a. Adult children of divorce who are emotionally and spiritually stable.
 - b. Single parents who have recovered from their own divorce (it is recommended that you be at least two to three years removed from your own divorce before serving in this program).
 - c. Senior adults who have children experiencing a divorce.
 - d. Grandparents who want to help other people's grandchildren find comfort.
 - e. Schoolteachers and childcare staff.
 - f. Those gifted by God in teaching and working with children.
 - g. Married couples who have a heart for children of divorce.
 - h. Anyone who has a passion for helping children of divorce.

4. *Those who have a heart for helping children of divorce and don't have a gift for working with children:* For those of you who recognize that this is a significant issue and want to help but aren't so sure about working directly with kids, there are also roles for you in DC4K:
 - a. *Ministry Helpers:* We have a need for people to prepare snacks, coordinate crafts and create small gifts for the children who will be in the program.
 - b. *Ministry Ambassadors:* One of the struggles a ministry such as this frequently encounters is getting the word out about the ministry and making sure that children who need our support are actually served by the program. We have a need for people who will help to spread the word about this ministry in our community.
 - c. *Prayer Warriors:* Any success in ministry begins with, and is sustained by, prayer. We are putting together a team of prayer warriors who will commit to consistent prayer for our DC4K ministry generally and the leaders and the children in the ministry specifically. If you are a gifted prayer, we would love you to join our team as a DC4K prayer warrior.





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We hope that you will prayerfully consider joining us as we launch this new Divorce Care 4 Kids ministry at our church.

There are thousands and thousands of hurting children in our community and surrounding communities. It is time that we, as the church, step up to help these children. A first step in doing that is creating a Divorce Care 4 Kids ministry at our church to minister to the needs of children of divorce. In doing so, we can point these kids to the healing power of a relationship with Christ and impact not only the rest of their lives, but their eternity. I hope that you will support us as we launch this new ministry.

¹ FAM1.B Family structure and children's living arrangements: Detailed living arrangements of children by gender, race and Hispanic origin, age, parent's education, and poverty status, 2010, from U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement. <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables/fam1b.asp>

² Based on ration of marriage rates to divorce rates and actual number of marriage from The Statistical Abstract of the United States.

³ Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians, Barna Research, September 8, 2004 (<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/194-born-again-christians-just-as-likely-to-divorce-as-are-non-christians>)

⁴ The Statistical Abstract of the United States shows that over 1,000,000 children were involved in divorce from 1974 through 1990. Those numbers were no longer reported subsequent to 1990. Calculated estimates based on information from the Statistical abstract of the United States regarding divorce rates and divorces and the Current Population Survey regarding number of children under 18 per family show that the number of children involved in divorce each year is likely around the same as it was pre 1990.

⁵ 18 Shocking Statistics about Children and Divorce by Larry Bilotta (<http://www.marriage-success-secrets.com/statistics-about-children-and-divorce.html>) citing The Abolition of Marriage, Gallagher

⁶ 18 Shocking Statistics about Children and Divorce by Larry Bilotta (<http://www.marriage-success-secrets.com/statistics-about-children-and-divorce.html>) citing Wade, Horn and Busy, "Fathers, Marriage and Welfare Reform" Hudson Institute Executive Briefing, 1997

⁷ The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America in 2010 – When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America, W. Bradford Wilcox, editor, Institute for American Values, University of Virginia: The National Marriage project, December 2010 (<http://www.stateofourunions.org>)

⁸ Children's Adjustment Following Divorce: Risk and Resilience Perspectives, J.B. Kelley & R.E. Emery, 2003

⁹ The Effects of Divorce on America by Patrick Fagan, Ph.D. and Robert Rector (<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2000/06/the-effects-of-divorce-on-america>)

¹⁰ 18 Shocking Statistics about Children and Divorce by Larry Bilotta (<http://www.marriage-success-secrets.com/statistics-about-children-and-divorce.html>) citing Andrew J. Cherlin, Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage –Harvard University Press 1981

¹¹ 18 Shocking Statistics about Children and Divorce by Larry Bilotta (<http://www.marriage-success-secrets.com/statistics-about-children-and-divorce.html>) citing Andrew J. Cherlin, Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage –Harvard University Press 1981 and The Effects of Divorce on America by Patrick Fagan, Ph.D. and Robert Rector (<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2000/06/the-effects-of-divorce-on-america>)





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¹² 18 Shocking Statistics about Children and Divorce by Larry Bilotta (<http://www.marriage-success-secrets.com/statistics-about-children-and-divorce.html>) citing Robert E. Emery, Marriage, Divorce, and Children's Adjustment (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1988), 94. For Emery's summary of the literature comparing divorce and death, see pages 57 and 67 (cite information from <http://www.divorcereform.org/psy.html>)

¹³ The Effects of Divorce on America by Patrick Fagan, Ph.D. and Robert Rector (<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2000/06/the-effects-of-divorce-on-america>)

¹⁴ Children of Divorce: The Shocking Statistics by Elijah James (<http://www.articlesbase.com/divorce-articles/children-of-divorce-the-shocking-statistics-833765.html>) citing "Marriage: The Safest Place for Women and Children", by Patrick F. Fagan and Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D. Backgrounder #1535

¹⁵ Lawton, L. E., & Bures, R. (2001). Parental Divorce and the "Switching" of Religious Identity. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 40, 99-111. Synopsis by Scott Stanley, on the Smart Marriages Archive 2/25/02, modified. As cited on <http://www.divorcereform.org/health.html#anchor1407382>.

¹⁶ Children of Divorce: The Shocking Statistics by Elijah James (<http://www.articlesbase.com/divorce-articles/children-of-divorce-the-shocking-statistics-833765.html>) citing "Marriage: The Safest Place for Women and Children", by Patrick F. Fagan and Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D. Backgrounder #1535

¹⁷ Painful Legacy of Divorce Breakup's Effect On Children Often Reaches Far into Adulthood by HealthyPlace.com Staff Writer, December 22, 2008 (<http://www.healthyplace.com/relationships/main/painful-legacy-of-divorce-breakups-effect-on-children-often-reaches-far-into-adulthood/menu-id-63/>) citing "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce," by Marin County psychologist Judith Wallerstein, San Francisco State University psychology professor Julia M. Lewis and New York Times science correspondent Sandra Blakeslee

¹⁸ 18 Shocking Statistics about Children and Divorce by Larry Bilotta (<http://www.marriage-success-secrets.com/statistics-about-children-and-divorce.html>) citing Peter Hill "Recent Advances in Selected Aspects of Adolescent Development" Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 1993

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²⁰ Bind Up the Broken Hearted and Set the Captives Free, Linda Ranson Jacobs (<http://www.hlp4.com/?q=node/69>)

²¹ Painful Legacy of Divorce Breakup's Effect On Children Often Reaches Far into Adulthood by HealthyPlace.com Staff Writer, December 22, 2008 (<http://www.healthyplace.com/relationships/main/painful-legacy-of-divorce-breakups-effect-on-children-often-reaches-far-into-adulthood/menu-id-63/>) citing "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce," by Marin County psychologist Judith Wallerstein, San Francisco State University psychology professor Julia M. Lewis and New York Times science correspondent Sandra Blakeslee

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- ²³ 18 Shocking Statistics about Children and Divorce by Larry Bilotta (<http://www.marriage-success-secrets.com/statistics-about-children-and-divorce.html>) citing Wallerstein "The Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children" Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 1991.
- ²⁴ Relationship Reasons for Divorce (http://www.psychpage.com/family/mod_couples_thx/divorce.html)
- ²⁵ Brian Willats, Breaking Up is Easy To Do, available from Michigan Family Forum. citing N.D. Glenn and K.B. Kramer, "The marriages and divorces of the children of divorce," Journal of Marriage and the Family, 49, pp. 811-825. Cited in Judith Wallerstein, Ph.D., "The Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children: A Review," Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, May 1991, p. 357. As cited on <http://www.divorcereform.org/teenmoms.html>. and Gallagher, M. (2002) Third Thoughts on Divorce. *National Review* v54 i5 p50. Retrieved June 9, 2004 from Expanded Academic ASAP as cited on <http://www.divorcereform.org/psy.html>.
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- ²⁷ An Exploration of the Ramifications of Divorce on Children and Adolescents by Sara Eleoff, The Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine, November 2003 (http://www.childadvocate.net/divorce_effects_on_children.htm) citing Wallerstein, JS. Corbin SB. The Child and the Vicissitudes of Divorce and The Effects of Divorce on Children by Robert Hughes, Jr., Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, April 10, 2009
- ²⁸ Brian Willats, Breaking Up is Easy To Do, available from Michigan Family Forum. citing Nicholas Zill, Donna Morrison, and Mary Jo Coiro, "Long-term Effects of Parental Divorce on Parent-Child Relationships, Adjustment, and Achievement in Young Adulthood," Journal of Family Psychology, 7:1, p. 96. Cited in Glenn T. Stanton, M.A., The Social Significance of the Traditional Two-Parent Family: The Impact of Its Breakdown on the Lives of Children, Adults, and Societies (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family, 1995), p. 9. As cited on <http://www.divorcereform.org/psy.html>.
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- ³² Based on 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data from the table "Single Years of Age and Sex: 2010" from American Fact Finder at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>
- ³³ This statistic includes Mifflin Village, Blendon Township, Jefferson Village, Plain Township, New Albany Village, Whitehall, Reynoldsburg and Truro Township for a total of 40,597 kids (based on 2010 U.S. Census data – see note above).
- ³⁴ Columbus has a total of 193,750 kids from age 0-18 (based on 2010 U.S. Census data - see note above)

