



WHAT CHURCHES CAN LEARN FROM SCHOOLS ABOUT HELPING CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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By Wayne D. Stocks

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Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, as its name would imply, is primarily about ministering to children of divorce and equipping the church to better minister to children from divorced and single-parent homes. However, last week someone on Facebook asked the question:

Besides sharing information with both households... how would you like to see schools be more supportive of separated and divorced parents?

The local schools are, in many respects, far out in front of the church in terms of adjusting to and responding to the issues that face children of divorce, and the church would do well to learn from, and partner with schools in helping these kids. Here is how I responded to the inquiry about what schools can do. I think these are also ideas the church can embrace and use to minister more effectively to children of divorce:

1. *Schools should encourage both parents to attend parent-teacher conferences. If the situation is such that both parents "can't" be present in the same room, schools should schedule parent-teacher conferences with each parent separately.*

In children's ministry we strive to communicate with parents and give them the tools to become the primary spiritual teachers of their children. Oftentimes, this takes the form of "take home papers" or periodic newsletters. For children of divorce, it is essential that both the custodial and non-custodial parent be provided these materials. Mail weekly materials to non-custodial parents. Reach out to non-custodial parents. If the child is attending multiple churches because of custody arrangements, reach out to the "other" church to develop a joint plan.

2. *Schools/teachers should be cognizant of the projects that they give to kids and how these might affect children of divorce. Things like family trees, etc. which are common assignments can be very troubling for children of divorce.*

There are similar projects that we have children do in children's ministries that can cause anguish for children of divorce. Many times, we encourage kids to make a craft and take it home to share with "their parents." For a child of divorce, they are faced with the dilemma of which parent to give





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the craft to or whether to share it with their parents at all. Be prepared to allow children of divorce to take home an "extra set" of craft supplies to complete a craft for both parents.

3. *Teachers should work with kids and parents to make sure that the child has available resources to successfully complete homework at both parents' homes. So many of these kids are forced to mature beyond their age early in terms of keeping track of books and homework assignments as they shuffle from one house to the other.*

We come across very similar issues at church. Take home papers that need to come back the following week get left at one parent's home or in the other parent's car. In the hustle and bustle of trying to live in two homes, it is difficult for kids to keep track of everything. As the church, like the school, you can help by making sure kids from divorced homes are not at a disadvantage by making sure children have multiple copies of workbooks or other resources needed for church.

4. *Teachers/Schools need to recognize the difficulties that these children have during, and after the divorce in terms of retaining information and plan accordingly. So many of these children live in fight or flight mode for months or years following the divorce. In this mode, their brains are less able to process and retain information. In subjects like math which constantly build upon what has been taught previously, this can leave the child "behind the eight ball" for the rest of their academic careers. Schools need to figure out how to help these kids get back up to speed when they are emotionally and psychologically at a place where they can process the information.*

At church, these children of divorce who are living in a state of fight or flight are not mentally in a position to memorize scripture. You may also find that they are unwilling or unable to sit through a lesson. As children's ministry workers, we have to understand what these kids are going through and adjust accordingly.

5. *Finally, while I believe that schools/teachers should be understanding and accommodating, I also think it is wrong for teachers to allow kids/parents to use the divorce/living arrangement as an "excuse." By doing this, we define these kids by their living situations rather than as individuals.*

While we must be willing, ready and able to help children of divorce, it is important that we maintain structure and rules in dealing with these kids. In a time where their whole world is falling apart, the church can provide a stable environment these kids can count on.

