



THE POWER OF EMPATHY AND THE CHILD OF DIVORCE

Page 1 of 3

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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What is the difference in these two closely related words empathy and sympathy? Empathy is the ability to mutually experience the thoughts, emotions, and direct experience of others. It goes beyond sympathy, which is a feeling of care and understanding for the suffering of others.

When I empathize with a child of divorce, I'm sharing some aspect of what they are experiencing. When I sympathize, I'm recognizing they are suffering and I feel sorrow for them but I don't necessarily feel or understand the experience.

Empathy = sharing one's pain.

Sympathy = sorrow for one's pain.

I know some of you are going to want to argue the point that you do have sympathy for these kids whose parents have divorced. But what does feeling sorry for them do for the child? Pity doesn't help them understand the divorce. It doesn't help them feel any better. It doesn't connect you to them on a heart level. It puts you on the outside of their pain. It's not wrong but as children's leaders the child deserves more from us than just sympathy.

Empathy is walking in their shoes. Empathy says, "I feel and know what you are going through." In your brain, empathy helps you figure out how you can help this child. It helps you have a heart understanding for the sorrow they are experiencing. It helps you set boundaries so you don't cave into their sorrow as in:

"Let's give poor Juan another treat. You know his dad left and I think we should be extra nice to him."

Does this mean you have to have experienced divorce in some way to have empathy for them? No, but it does mean that you have taken the time to understand their situation, and you have also taken it to the God the Father who will help you to connect on a heart level with this child. It means you must see their situation from their perception. You accept how they feel. You listen carefully and don't judge them. And, you don't see them as victims.





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Page 2 of 3

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For example:

Child: "My dad hates me. Know why? Cause he didn't come pick me up on his Saturday."

What you might start to say or want to say is: "Oh come now, You know your dad loves you. Maybe he had to work Saturday."

First of all, you can't know that the dad loves this child. Second, you are judging this child's perception of why his dad didn't pick him up. Third, you are allowing your sympathy to get in the way by trying to convince the child his dad still loves him and you are making excuses for the dad because you feel sorry for this child and his experience last weekend. You may even think, "How awful for this child. How could a dad do that to him." You have just placed him as a victim.

What you need to say is something like:

"Whoa! Seems like that would be upsetting," or

"Oh my, what did you do?" or

"I can see how that would be upsetting. What are you going to do now?" or

"I'm sorry that happened to you. That must have been a real bummer." or

"I imagine you might be feeling kind of _____." Wait for the child to respond.

Empathy opens the door in this conversation to allow the child to talk about the situation. For some children, all they need is to tell you about it, know you understand and they move on. When you use empathy to respond, you open the door of trust from you to the child. He will come back again to talk to you. You've become the Jesus feet, ears, hands and voice.

Jesus brought empathy into our world when He took the weight of our sins upon Him. He felt all those emotions and feelings we have. Because He did He provided for believers to be "one in heart and mind" Acts 4:32

Empathy is powerful because it allows you to do Jesus ministry to these kids.

*"Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." Proverbs 16:24
(NIV)*



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Page 3 of 3

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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. Linda offers support, encouragement and suggestions to help those working with the child of divorce. She serves as DC4K Ambassador (<http://www.dc4k.org>) and can be reached via email at ljacobs@dc4k.org.

Free articles and devotions for single parent families in your church can be found at Linda's website Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids (<http://www.hlp4.com>).

