



## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LOSING A PARENT TO DEATH AND DIVORCE

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By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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Losing a parent to death or to divorce is catastrophic for any child. There are different issues in the grief process between the death of a parent and death of your parent's marriage.

When a child loses a parent due to death even young children can understand the concept that the body quit working. They all come across toys or things that break and quit working. Most have experienced the death of a pet, a goldfish or an insect they have found. While I'm not comparing the death of a goldfish to the loss and the grief involved in the death of a parent, the concept I want to convey is the idea of things no longer working. The goldfish's body quit working. The toy quit working. The body of their parent quit working. That is the beginning of understanding the death of their parent.

In the death of a parent, other family members, the church, neighbors and possibly even the co-workers of the parent surround most families.

Meals are brought in; gifts for the kids might be left. The remaining parent grieves and may weep and hug their child a lot. There is a lot of support and acknowledgment of the death. Ever so slowly the family develops a new normal and life moves forward.

There is no fighting about the kids and which parent the child will live or when the child will visit the other parent. There is no confusion about the parent that died loving the child. The parent is gone but the child still knows the parent is still part of the family unit, even if he or she is in heaven. The child doesn't question the unity that brought him or her into existence. The other parent may pull out pictures and the child sees and remembers family life and the love that existed.

The difference in missing a parent due to death and missing a parent due to divorce or separation of a cohabitation situation is there is no public acknowledgement of the death of the marriage unless you want to consider the divorce decree. Most couples don't even go to court any longer as they rely on mediation. When you think about the separation of the cohabitating parent there is not even a piece of paper ending the relationship.

Most young children understand that they exist because their parents love each other. Because they love each other a child was born out of this love. The child is part mom and part dad. Andrew Root in "The Children of Divorce" and on the [Family Scholars](http://FamilyScholars.com) website talks about how the [ontological security](http://ontologicalsecurity.com) of being is threatened in





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the child of divorce. The divorce strikes at a child's identity and even existence. After all if I exist because of my parent's love, now that they no longer love each other, do I even exist? Or am I supposed to exist? What happens to me?

Along with these deep questions of being, most children of divorce will blame themselves for the divorce being their fault. They are left wondering not only if a departing parent loved them but also if the one leaving will still make time to see them. Will they still be their parent? Will other kids take their place in the departing parent's new relationships?

Because little kids often don't understand where the parent went, it is up to the adults around them to help them understand. This is a different situation but one that I used when my daughter was deployed to Afghanistan. I was the primary caregiver of the then three-year-old child. Because he couldn't comprehend where his mom went, I had to come up with something that was physical and something he could touch.

### ***One idea of what to do to help***

I purchased a large world map. Then I took pictures of my grandson and put it on the place in Florida where we lived. I took a picture of a small plane and placed it over the ocean. Next I took a picture of mommy and placed it in on the map over Afghanistan. I drew short lines to form a path between Florida and Afghanistan.

I placed this large map by the back door where he always left and entered upon returning home. I explained that mommy got on an airplane and flew across the ocean. He knew what an ocean was because we live close to the beach. At first he would stop and just stare at that map every morning. Then he would take his finger and trace the flight path to Afghanistan. He could see how his mom and him were still connected and where she was. The entire time she was deployed he would look at that map. It was something physical that kept mommy in his memory and kept her present with him. We kept that map up even after she returned home. Often he would show it to her.

This same concept could be used for the younger child of divorce to show him/her where their parent has moved. This may especially help the children when the parent has moved out of the area.

### ***Other suggestions***

- Encourage the single parent to allow pictures of the other parent to be posted over the child's bed.
- Display family type activities in the child's room.
- Encourage the single parent to let her/his child contact the other parent often via Skype or phone.





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- Ask the other parent to record themselves reading a storybook to the child to listen to when going to bed. (My daughter video recorded reading a bedtime story and sent the storybook along with the DVD to my grandson so he could have mommy reading him his bedtime story.)
- Encourage the single parent to have the child draw pictures, take a picture and email it to the other parent.
- Set up a secret Facebook page where the child can connect on a regular basis with the other parent. In a secret group, only people you invite can see what is posted on that page. Grandparents and other extended family can be included on the secret page. Elementary age children, tween and teens can do their own posting on this secret page.

I'm sure if you set your creative minds to it you will think of many other ideas to help the child of divorce survive and process the divorce of their parents.

*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](mailto:ljacobs@dc4k.org). You can find additional articles from Linda on her blog at <http://blog.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>).*

