



TRAUMA INFORMED CHURCHES

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

07/27/2014

In our world today many children are experiencing early childhood trauma. We now know through a lot of research that childhood trauma can affect a child for the rest of their lives. The website [ACEs too High](#) (Adverse Childhood Experiences) explains through several articles and research reviews about how trauma in early childhood can affect a child's behavior and health during childhood and can cause life-long problems.



We know that early trauma causes toxic stress on the brains of young children. So much so that the American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a policy statement about this issue. They encourage pediatricians to aid a child who is experiencing toxic stress.

This means they will need to not only check a child for the normal ear infections, colds and administer the typical childhood immunizations, but they will also need to ask questions about the home life. In essence baby doctors have been told, "[Your new job is to reduce toxic stress.](#)"

We have schools that are becoming *trauma informed schools*. They are reaching out and changing the way they work with children with challenging behaviors and teens with out of control behaviors.

They are going from punitive discipline to informed discipline measures. Instead of a strict no tolerance policy, they are developing policies of conscious discipline of love and comfort. Without realizing it, many schools are now treating children like Jesus did in the Bible, pulling the children up on His lap and comforting them.

In San Francisco at the [El Dorado Elementary](#) school administrators and teachers are rethinking ways of resetting their classroom discipline policies. Now in each El Dorado Elementary school there is a "peace corner" where kids can take a break if they need to. Beanbag chairs, books, squeeze toys, blankets, stuffed animals, windmills to blow into, pencils, crayons and paper crowd the peace corners at El Dorado. This is not a time out but simply a place to go to calm down and de-stress.

Why am I talking about pediatricians and elementary schools when this is a blog about churches and children of divorce?

Because one adverse childhood experiences that changes a child's life and for many children add layer upon layers of toxic stress is *divorce*. While the divorce rate is going down, the co-habitation rate is going up. When a child's parent's separate or one of the partners leaves, to the child it is a divorce, it is the death of what they have known as "the family".





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Many in the church realm think the only children affected by trauma are children who have experienced severe child abuse, neglect, poverty, or a tornado or some other act of nature, etc. Many of us don't think we have these children in our churches.

I get calls, emails, texts and Facebook messages from ministers who are experiencing out of control and unruly children. They are most often clueless as to what to do or how to help turn a child's behavior around. The majority of these children are children who have experienced the childhood trauma of divorce.

Along with the divorce they have also experienced things children should never be exposed to. Rarely is a divorce just a division of property and assignment of a visitation schedule for kids. It is a war and many times ugly things happen as a result of this war.

Following are just a few situations children I know have experienced. And these are all children are in churches.

- A 7 year old witnessed his military dad with PTSD throw his mom in the closet. When the mom was finally able to break out, the dad was kneeling with a loaded rifle aimed right at her chest
- A 6 year old was sexually molested by his sister's dad
- An 8 year old girl was touched inappropriately by her dad
- Two elementary age boys watched as their mom hit a hole in the wall because she was so frustrated and angry at the dad
- A 13 year old saw the sexting on her dad's phone
- As a preschooler she saw her mom repeatedly get high

Perhaps if those of us in the religious realm would buy into the adverse childhood experiences, we could develop "trauma informed churches". We could provide church family to support the children while their own families are falling apart.

- Change discipline policies from punitive to loving and positive. There are some churches that when a child is out of control request the child not come back for two weeks. The thinking behind this is the parents will need to help the child get in control. Trouble is many are single parents and they are out of control themselves. How can they help the child?
- Develop relationships with the children. Each child should have at least one person on the children's team who the child can rely on to be there for them. For large churches that house a hundred kids in one group this may be a challenge but I hope you understand the importance of relationship building. If a child comes to church and doesn't connect with at least one adult on a regular basis how can we ever expect the child to come to a loving relationship with Jesus Christ?





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- Grandparent like people could step up and support the children through tough times. In my own church my husband and I have adopted a couple of little girls as our grandkids. Their grandmother lives in another state and our grandkids live far away from us. It is a win-win for all of us.
- Set up support groups that can help a child become resilient. Children can only be resilient when they have a support system.

“[Resilience](#) is attained and maintained through a community of caring adults that can provide at-risk children and their parents with safe, stable, and nurturing relationships. It is through attunement with a safe adult that children become resilient.”

This is only the start of developing trauma informed churches. A start that unfortunately is necessary in our world today.

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. 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 Partnerships for Our Kids (<http://www.hlp4.com>).

