



CHILDREN'S MINISTRY TALK DISCUSSES MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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By Wayne D. Stocks

10/24/2011

A few weeks back, I wrote to Dick Gruber and Jason Rhode at [Children's Ministry Talk](#) to get their thoughts on ministering to children of divorce. I've been a fan of their podcast for years. It is full of great information for children's pastors and others who work in children's ministry. Both Dick and Jason have worked extensively in children's ministry and both are now involved in training future children's ministry leaders. I respect their opinions, and I was curious to hear what they had to say. They did not disappoint.

The whole show is available for download [here \[http://www.childrensministrytalk.com/68\]](http://www.childrensministrytalk.com/68). However, the show had enough useful and practical information that I also wanted to transcribe/summarize the answers for our readers here on Divorce Ministry 4 Kids.



I asked Dick and Jason the following questions:

1. What practical things can a children's ministry do to better serve children of divorce? For example, how do handle interactions with both parents? How do you structure things for kids who can only be there every other week? What special ministry do children of divorce need?
2. What would you say to a child who walks into your ministry on a Sunday morning and announces that they packed up Daddy's (or Mommy's) things the day before and they are moving out?
3. How can we minister to children of divorce over the long term (i.e., in addition to just at the immediate time of the divorce)?

Dick Gruber started the show by indicating that this show would include "partial answers" and invited listeners to weigh in with their opinions as well. I would invite our readers to do the same in the comments section below.

Below, I have attempted to summarize what Dick Gruber said in response to each of the questions. I think those of us who work in children's ministry can glean some very useful insights from the information and suggestions Dick had to offer.





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What practical things can a children's ministry do to better serve children of divorce?

Adopt-A-Family

Dick explained that one of the things he's always done when they have father-son, father-daughter, mother-daughter, etc. events is to have an "adopt-a-family" ministry where kids can be folded into a family for that event. They don't advertise it as "if your parents are divorced." They advertise, "if your father can't make it" you can join one of the adopt-a-families. They use Christian men who have been screened and give them two or three kids for the event so they can enjoy the event and the kids doesn't have to be embarrassed. Many churches will advertise events and not have an option for kids who don't have a parent in the home.

Make sure you are inclusive of kids who don't have a parent available for the event. It happens all the time when we have events where we assume that parents will be involved (events like pine-wood derbies, etc.).

Appropriate Discipline Policy

We should offer support for these children. One way is in discipline. It is good to have a policy, but the policy may need to bend a little bit when the child is going through sever emotional stress like a divorce in the family. We need to be sensitive to that.

Explaining the Family and the Father Image of God

We also need to be sensitive when it comes to how we explain the family and particularly the father image of God. In a majority of cases, it is the mom who becomes the primary caretaker of the kids. So, be careful with terminology and how you explain the father image of God. Also, be careful with how you explain the family. God's ideal plan is that a family would include both a mother and a father, but that doesn't always happen. Be sensitive as you get into different subjects in children's church.

Divorce Care 4 Kids

If your church has a counseling ministry, and they do some sort of counseling for adults going through a divorce, why not add Divorce Care 4 Kids? DC4K is a great support group for kids going through a divorce.

DivorceMinistry4Kids.com

Dick was gracious enough to give a shout out to our ministry here on Divorce Ministry 4 Kids as well as a resource for those trying to minister to children of divorce.





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What would you say to a child who walks into your ministry on a Sunday morning and announces that they packed up Daddy's (or Mommy's) things the day before and they are moving out?

An Initial Response

Dick explained that that had happened to him. The Mom came in and tried to get the kids to tell him what happened. The Mom said, "Dad moved out yesterday." The kid was crying and mom was mad, so Dick explained what he did next.

- He got down on one knee to talk to the child face-to-face.
- He established eye contact with him.
- He told the child that he loved him and he wasn't leaving him.
- He explained the Jesus wasn't leaving the child.
- He told him that Mom and Dad are going to be saying some stupid and scary things in the days to come, but they still love you.
- He told him that his parents can't get along, but they still love him.
- And, most important, he reassured him that no matter what happened, he was on the child's side.
- He gave the child his phone number and told him to call him day or night.

Dick discussed the fact that he had to go to court in that case to represent the child's best interest and not side with either parent.

It's important for kids to have someone to talk to.

Defining the Problem

Dick explained that he has had lots of kids come in once the divorce is final or dad had moved out the week before. It's a huge problem in and out of the church. Focus on the Family says that 50% of kids will spend some time living in a single parent home.

Remembering Scripture

It is also important that we remember some scriptural truths:

1. That we **bear one another's burdens**. That child of divorce has a great burden.





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2. We **serve one another in love**, so we always want to be there to serve that child and help them. We want to reinforce positive conclusions and pray with the child for both parents. Don't take the side of just one parent. Come to godly conclusions with the child.

3. **Pray** that God would heal the marriage. We can trust in Jesus, but Jesus is not going to force your parents to do anything. They're making choices, and we can choose to pray for them.

4. The Bible says **we're here to set at liberty those who are captive**. We do that by praying with kids, helping kids and loving kids. Dick quotes Proverb 31:8 which says:

*Open your mouth for the mute,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
(Proverbs 31:8 ESV)*

Someone has to speak up for the child!

Recognize Your Own Limitations

Parents sometimes come and want the children's pastor to fix their kid following a divorce. It's never their fault. It's not that they got divorced or hate one another and yelling at one another and not acting like Christians, it's a problem with the child.

In terms of counseling, we need to recognize our own limitations. You can be their friend and pastor, but they need to counsel with someone who is better at it. With parents, you can tell them you're not qualified to do the kind of counseling that needs to be done. When parents have brought kids, they wanted a quick fix.

Feelings of Children of Divorce

Dick explained that he has done a lot of study on children of divorce because he is a child of divorce. In reviewing all of the books he has on the subject, he compiled a list of all of the reactions kids have to divorce that appeared in all books. These were the top 7:

1. Physical Illness. Dick explained when his parents were getting divorced, he was sick two or three days a week. Stress causes chemicals to be released which can cause problems. It is not a time for a big counseling session, it a time to pray with them and let them lie down.
2. Guilt. They feel like it's their fault. Kids will do a "magical bargaining" thing with God. They think, "If I'm good enough God will bring my parents back together."





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3. Not caring. Big problem is that this can transfer to self. Eventually they won't care about themselves, and this can lead to suicide.
4. Denial. They might pretend everything is ok, but eventually that will come crashing down.
5. Hope for rematch. Kids want their parents to get back together.
6. Lack of security. God designed families to be together. It provides basic security, and when mom or dad leaves, the security they had is gone. They develop a great fear of all kinds of things – fear of parent they're living with dying, fear of burglaries, etc.
7. Hate. I hate my Dad typically transfer to I hate God, or I hate authority or I hate my teachers at school. What they are really saying is I hate this situation.

Children of divorce are going to go through the grief process. The difference between grief in divorce and death is that in death the kids can eventually grow through it. In divorce, they see that parent every other weekend, and the grief starts all over again. Be aware of these signs if you work with kids. You will see these reactions in the kids in your ministry.

How can we minister to children of divorce over the long term (i.e., in addition to just at the immediate time of the divorce)?

Pray! Be there. Be sensitive. Be Supportive and be there to help. Always be there for them.

Thank you to Dick Gruber and Jason Rhode for tackling this difficult issue with the grace and wisdom that I have become accustomed to from their show. I encourage you to hop on over to [Children's Ministry Talk](http://ChildrensMinistryTalk.com) and listen to this episode and all the others.

