



HOW CHILDRENS MINISTERS CAN HELP CHILDREN OF DIVORCE AT CHRISTMAS TIME

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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Recognizing the plight of children of divorce at Christmas can help children in divorced families stay connected to the church and attentive to the birth of Christ during the holidays.

Christmas Through the Eyes of the Child of Divorce

While most people get excited about the holidays, children from divorced homes often go into a depression, get very anxious or simply disconnect when preparing for all of the events associated with Christmas. Sometimes, this is related to the uncertainty surrounding which home they will be in when celebrating various events. Other times, it might be because they really want to be with both parents during the holidays but know that that is not possible. This leads to a feeling of being overwhelmed. Or they may fantasize about their parents getting back together. When that doesn't happen, they can become angry or sad. Many children of divorce simply feel lost during the holidays so they disconnect.

With all the rushing around at the holidays for parties, church, concerts, plays, shopping and more, single parents still have to work. They still have to parent alone, and stress abounds. Children may feel the stress of the Christmas celebration times two – two homes and two parents. You might say they experience double whammies of both stress and holiday celebrating.

Children may remember the Christmas from the year before and agonize wondering if they will experience another Christmas day like last year. Last year, the children started Christmas at mom's parents' house. Everyone was celebrating, and all the little cousins were there. Just about the time the children got involved in the games, somebody interrupted, packed them up and led them out for the journey to the other parent's home. The children then had to enter another scene: a scene already taking place. At the other parent's home all the little cousins were already playing games, so the children had to navigate into the already formed structure.

The difference between children of divorce and children in two-parent homes is that the child of divorce so often has no one to help them navigate into the new atmosphere. While children from two parent homes may





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travel to various relative's homes, they do so as a family, and the parents go with the children and help them enter the next environment.

With the child of divorce, in a few short minutes, they have to say goodbye to one parent and that home while saying hello to the other parent and entering a second home. Gifts that were just opened must be left behind. The comfort and warmth of the day must be left behind and restructuring of different feelings must begin in the second home.

For some children of divorce just about the time they begin to get comfortable in the second home, dad might whisk the kids off to his girlfriend's house or her parent's home. Some children will be required to eat two, three and even four large meals on Christmas Day. It is not a fun day for many children of divorce.

The Feelings of Children of Divorce at Christmastime

During the holiday season many children will experience a tremendous amount of anger due to the divorce. The child may be thinking,

"How come Dad didn't think of me before he left? He just wants to be over there in that apartment by himself. Well, he deserves to be alone at Christmastime. I don't care."

Meanwhile, the child really does care!

Another feeling that seems to hover over for the child of divorce during the holidays is sadness. If the primary parent is the dad, then they may wonder why mom can't come home just for the holidays and cook their favorite food like she always used to. They internalize this as mom not loving them enough to come home and provide for them.

The Christmas Conundrum Created by Church

When you add Christmas plays at church where most children get excited to perform before their families, the child of divorce may be embarrassed that they only have one parent who will attend. Or they may get very anxious wondering if both parents will attend. They may question what they will do if the parents start fighting or yelling at each other while they are in the same room with one another.

If both parents attend and sit on opposite sides of the room the child's eye may search back and forth to see if each parent is watching. While children from two-parent homes find pride in having their families at the event, and want to honor the birthday of Christ, the child of divorce may be self-conscious about their family situation.





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Standing in front of an audience the last thing on their minds might be the birth of Christ. For the most part, they just want to get through the event and off the platform.

Christmas parties at church might also cause added pressure. They may wonder where they are going to get the money to purchase a gift. They may wonder if it's their mom's weekend if she will take them to church for a party. So they sit there and make no commitments about attending and they don't get excited.

What Can Children's Ministers Do?

As children's leaders there are some things you can do to minimize the pressure for some of the children. First of all find out about their situation. Do they live with mom and attend church with her? Do they reside with dad but mom brings them to church on her weekends.

Know the Parents

See if you can determine which parent they will be with on the day of the Christmas party. If it is the parent that doesn't bring them to church, get permission from the parent to call the other parent. Be friendly and upbeat when you call. Introduce yourself and explain how much you'd like for their child to attend the up and coming party. Ask the other parent if they would like to come with their child and take part or volunteer in some small capacity. Offer to send someone to pick up the child if they parent isn't interested.

While it may prove time consuming try to make sure both parents are on your holiday email list. Take a moment to put the Sunday bulletin in the mail to the parent that doesn't attend your church. Put a post it note on the front of the bulletin or circle the up and coming event and add a short letter explaining how excited their child is about the event. Include your phone number or email in case they have any questions.

Have Extra Gifts

Always make sure you have extra gifts on hand so the child won't feel left out because their parent didn't know about the gift exchange. Sometimes the single parent is under so much stress that they just don't realize all that is required in different situations. Or they may not get all the invitations, notes or newsletters about the event. This is particularly true if they are not the primary care giver.

Do Your Homework

If your children's group is performing a song for a special service, find out if the child of divorce will be able to attend the event. If not, don't give them a solo. Allow them to rehearse when they are there so they won't feel left out but don't put them in roles of leadership if there is any hint they might not be able to attend the event.





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If the child is not at the event then have someone take pictures and send them to the child in a Christmas card with a note from you. Attention and knowing they were remembered goes a long way in keeping the child of divorce involved with the church during this special holiday.

While you may think you know the family of a child of divorce, you may only know the family that attends your church. There is another family, another parent and another home to be remembered. And the child is part of both families.

Additional Resources

To help you understand the plight of the single parent during the holidays read the following articles:

- Before the Birth of Christ (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/107)
- Celebrating Christmas in Single Parent Homes (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/104)
- Give It All to Jesus (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/111)
- Helping Children of Divorce Through the Holidays (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/105)
- Holidays Can Bring Guilt for Children of Divorce (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/103)
- Reasons Why Children of Divorce Get Angry During the Holidays (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/106)
- Thinking About Celebrating with Your Ex? (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/109)
- The Wind Chime that Changed Christmas (www.hlp4.com/?q=node/108)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: 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. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda's website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\) \[http://www.hlp4.com\]](http://www.hlp4.com). Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at Linda@hlp4.com.

