



PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN OF DIVORCE DEAL WITH STRESS

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

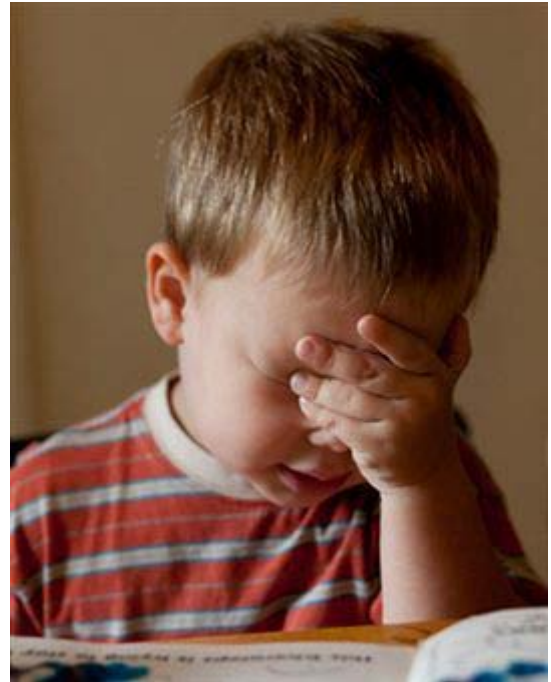
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Divorce for children can be considered one of the highest stressors children face in our world today. In order to help children learn and retain information, we need to help them learn to de-stress. While teachers in schools have been learning much about brain based learning, the flow hasn't always come across to church leaders and teachers.

We are learning that when children are experiencing fear or feeling anxious, they are not in the right frame of mind to learn. In the article entitled "Create a Safe Climate for Learning" Tip #1 on Six Tips for Brain-Based Learning (Edutopia.org), they explain:

"In layman's terms, stress scrambles the learning circuits."

During periods of stress or fear, the amygdale (the part of the brain that processes emotions and stores the memories of emotional reactions) responds to a perceived threat by blocking the flow of information to the learning centers of the brain.



There are many practical ways to help children who come into your church classes stressed by the divorce of their parents:

Be A Student of your Children

Learn all you can about the children in your group. Often times, children of divorce will not even divulge the fact that their parents are divorcing. You might figure it out though when these children can't memorize verses or don't seem to pay attention or connect with the leaders in your room or other children.

Breathing

Breathing is an important tool in relieving stress. Dr. Becky Bailey (author of *Conscious Discipline* (Loving Guidance, Inc.) 800-842-2846 www.ConsciousDiscipline.com) explains that stressed children need more blood moving to the brain. For children under tremendous amounts of stress, their breathing tends to become shallow. If you watch, you will notice some of these children's shoulders will be tense, and their breathing appears to be rapid and carried high up in their chest. When working with a stressed child, teach them to breathe from the diaphragm. If the diaphragm isn't moving, you're not accessing the upper level of the brain. It's





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not inhaling that is important, but exhaling that is critical. The exhale calms and slows you down. Breathing from the diaphragm can easily be incorporated into a game or musical activities to help stressed out children.

Lighten the Mood

Judy Willis, a neurologist and former classroom teacher, explains in the article, "To Enable Learning Put (Emotional) Safety First (www.edutopia.org/neuroscience-brain-based-learning-emotional-safety) that it is helpful to lighten the mood by making jokes and creating a lighter mood in the group. She says to create a welcoming environment through welcoming rituals and games and give the children plenty of opportunities to ask questions and engage in discussions without judgment about what is said. She also encourages teachers to create an environment in which mistakes are encouraged. And lastly she says to listen to the kids.

Some kids need to be encouraged to talk and you can accomplish this by asking questions. Don't be afraid to ask the child of divorce about their other parent or about their time with the other parent. Don't probe, but bring the questions into the general conversation. There are very few places where a child of divorce can feel free to mention the other parent let alone be encouraged to talk about them. Be sure to incorporate prayer request into your environment also and give the child of divorce the freedom to request prayer for the parent that no longer lives in their home.

Music

Music can be a great stress release. Research in studying the brain and how music affects the brain is revealing some interesting data. We now have reason to believe that musical harmonies actually have the capacity to rewire the brain, creating connections between different regions of the brain. Some research shows that listening to music can boost memory, attention and learning. Music can lower stress, and it can activate both sides of the brain. Music can have a positive impact on a person's mood, and it can actually alleviate depression in some people.

By using music with children, we can pump information into their brains and their hearts that they normally wouldn't hear. At some point in time these words will come back out of their mouths. Did you know that Alzheimer's patients who can no longer communicate with loved ones will still sing the words to the hymns they learned as a small child? They can't remember other things or communicate, but they can sing the correct tune with the right words even when no one else is singing.

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deuteronomy 29:29).





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Movement

Developmental experts have known for years that active movement improves school performance, concentration, mood and behavior. Now we are learning that movement stimulates children's brains, and organized movement helps the brain to focus. Not only do kids need to be up and moving, but they need organized movement as well.

Kathie Nunley (the author of the author of A Student's Brain: The Parent/Teacher Manual published by Morris Publishing) in her online newsletter (February 4, 2004) says,

"Exercise has been shown to greatly reduce cortisol levels in the brain as well as increase norepinephrine. Cortisol is secreted as a result of stress and specifically targets the memory area of the brain ... Increasing norepinephrine can reduce behavior problems which is generally good news for everyone."

You can find more from Ms. Nunley on her website at www.brains.orgin.

Pam Schiller in an article in "Child Care Information Exchange" May 1998 (p. 52) states,

"Cross lateral activities encourage children to integrate the use of the left and right hemisphere of the brain."

In seminars she also says to use extensive hand motions when singing. The more extensive ways you move, the better you can get the message to the brain. She includes shaking your hands, hugging yourself and says to encourage the children any way you can to cross lateral and cross midline. (Pam Schiller is the author of Start Smart (Gryphon House) <http://pamschiller.com/>).

When DivorceCare for Kids (DC4K) was created many cross lateral and cross midline activities were developed. Wise leaders will use these activities to de-stress children's brains. One leader said,

"For years I have worked with stressed out children and children displaying aggressive behaviors. Early on in my career I figured out if I got these children up and moving around, then our day went better. It seemed like the more stressed out a child was, the more he or she needed to get up and get moving, whether it was running or jumping or whatever. It was as if the child had to be moving in order to learn."

This has been my personal experience as well. The more stressed a child is the more a child needs to be up and moving, stretching, and doing cross lateral and cross midline activities.



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Food and Water

It's important for stressed children to drink water – a lot of water. Stress tends to dehydrate the brain. When brains are dehydrated they can't think. Remember last week we learned that signs of poorly managed stress can be acid stomach, dry mouth, gas, and diarrhea? All of these symptoms can be helped by drinking water.

For dry mouths, a piece of peppermint candy can also do wonders. Keep a few peppermint candies available or in your pocket for some of these kids.

Laughter is the Best Medicine

Laughter can be one of the best stress releasers of all. Researchers are learning that laughter releases endorphins, the feel-good brain chemical, which enhances moods. Laughing has been known to lower blood pressure and block pain. It has been said that a good session of laughter can be a jog for the internal stomach muscles. That means you have to laugh until you hurt. Many children of divorce just don't get that opportunity very often so lighten up and have fun.

The cheerful heart has a continual feast. [Proverbs 15:15]

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.

