

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE NEED DEPENDABLE COMMUNITIES

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By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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In years past, when family life was in turmoil, the local community church was the place people went for comfort. When divorce became rampant in the seventies, many of those divorcing families quit attending church all together. The very place these hurting children needed the most (church) ended up being the first place they were pulled away from.

Community As A Place of Comfort

Today our families are deteriorating while churches largely ignore the problem. Research and reports tell us that up to 65% of all families in American are non-nuclear families. This includes single parent families, step families, etc. Communities have lost their ability to function as whole and viable places that protect their children and youth. Our children are at risk and no one knows what to do or how to help them. While those of us in the religious realm want it to be the church, sadly today the church is no longer the first place many people think of as the community safe place of comfort.



Hardwired to Connect

In 2003 The Commission on Children at Risk, a panel of thirty-three leading children's doctors, research scientist and youth service professionals sponsored by Dartmouth Medical School, YMCA and the Institute for American Values issued a report called "Hardwired to Connect." (<http://familyscholars.org/2003/01/01/hardwired-to-connect/>) This was the first scientific study that concentrated on what communities need to provide for children with challenging behaviors.

The project was started because of the concern over seeing growing numbers of children and youth that were failing to flourish. The experts were also concerned with the large percentage of children and youth that were suffering from mental illness, emotional anguish and overwhelming behavior problems. This included, but was not limited to depression, drug abuse, suicidal and violent tendencies. The majority of the people on the commission were children's doctors and those in the mental health profession.

In the report (page 8) it says,



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“One of the main reasons we formed this commission is that our waiting lists are too long.”

The second reason members of the commission gave for developing this study was the failure to understand as a society and as professionals the ability to respond effectively to the decline of the well being of America's children and youth. The Hard Wired team reviewed new research on the brain, human behavior as well as the social trends of today. Included in this group of distinguished people was Judith Wallerstein, the psychologist that has studied the same 131 children of divorcing parents for the past 25 years. Much of the “Hardwired to Connect” report validates and verifies what she and many of us have known for years.

Dependable Communities and the Child of Divorce

To me the report typifies what type of communities, and the types of relational environments, children of divorce need in order to be able to survive and later thrive in their lives. Children are hardwired for close attachments to others. This first starts with their parents, broadens out to the extended family and then to the community.

The Hardwired to Connect group feels that meeting this need for connectedness is primarily the task of what they are calling authoritative communities, which means dependable communities. These are communities or groups of people who are committed to each other and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life.

Does this sound like what many of us think our churches are supposed to be doing? Doesn't this sound like a New Testament church community that we read about in the Bible?

The report says that the weakening of dependable communities is the principal reason why our children are failing to flourish. But remember they are scientists, doctors and professionals that have come together to try and wake up the American society and our government.

I believe that the weakening of our families and our churches is the principal reason why our children are failing. Somewhere along the way we have allowed divorce and society to usurp our churches of their responsibilities and their authority.

If you read the Hardwired to Connect report you will see two main outcomes of the report.

1. As we have already stated, children are born with their brains hardwired for close connections to others. Children need to belong. Belonging is critical for their development. We see this over and over again in our DC4K (DivorceCare for Kids) groups. Children that come to these groups must feel a part of the



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group. It's amazing that in just a few short weeks in these classes we are seeing children bond with each other and with their leaders. They are forming close attachments. One little boy said,

"See I didn't want to come to DC4K but my mom made me. Then when I got here everybody felt sorry for me and I felt sorry for everybody and now we are all friends and Dawson is my best friend."

Children need to be able to have close relationships with parents first and then those around them.

2. Children are hardwired for spiritual meaning. This should be no surprise to those of us in the religious realm. We have known this for years but now it has been given credibility by these scientist, doctors and other professionals.

There are ten planks laid out in the report for communities to consider in developing these dependable communities. I believe there are children's church programs that are dependable and allow children to connect on a deep level; that encourages relationships to develop and points children toward Jesus Christ, meeting the need to develop spiritually.

In a later article, we will look at these ten planks and use them as a means for evaluating if your program for ministering to children of divorce successfully accommodates the child of divorce in your community.

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.

