

WHY DIVORCE SHOULD MATTER TO THOSE WHO MINISTER TO CHILDREN AND STUDENTS

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By Wayne D. Stocks

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At the crux of Divorce Ministry 4 Kids is a desire to call churches to serve, and equip churches to better minister to, children suffering from the effects of the divorce of their parents and/or living in single parent families. At times, that means encouraging churches to start programs like Divorce Care 4 Kids or The Big "D" which are "support group" type programs targeted at children of divorce to help them deal with the impacts of the divorce and point them towards God as the ultimate source of healing. However, just starting a new program isn't enough. Truly

ministering to these children and students requires that those in our churches who work week in and week out with our kids must also be prepared and equipped to deal with the fallout from divorce.

As people who minister to children and students, we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to children of divorce and children from single parent families. Recent government studies show that only 60.3% of children live with their married biological or adoptive parents. That means that 40% of all children either live with cohabiting biological parents (3%), in single parent homes (27%), step families (6%), or without either biological parent (4%). There is some variation by race, but lest you think this issue does not affect your community or church, here is the breakdown by race of children living with other than their married biological parents:

Race	%
White	34.93%
White, non-Hispanic	31.12%
Black	69.60%
Black, non-Hispanic	70.56%
Asian	60.07%
Hispanic	43.64%

All of that means that, on average, 2 of every 5 kids who come through your church doors every Sunday morning have either experienced the divorce of their parents or grown up in single-parent homes.

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The impacts of divorce are well documented, severe and long-lasting. The impacts range from emotional reactions like anger, depression, guilt, loneliness and a host of others to physical problems related to stress to spiritual difficulties in relating to a Heavenly Father after being abandoned by their earthly fathers. If we are to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ to these children, we must be prepared to meet them where they are, and that means knowing their situation and understanding what they are going through. To that end, the remainder of this article consists of a self-evaluation questionnaire to help you assess where your church and ministries stands in terms of meeting the needs of these kids.

Examine Your Ministry

Here is a self-evaluation questionnaire for gauging how responsive your ministry is to children of divorce and children from single-parent homes. Consider each question carefully and honestly and grade yourself and your ministry.

1. How many children are there in your ministry? What is 40% of that number? This is a rough estimate of the number of kids from divorced and single-parent families.
2. Do you know exactly how many kids in your ministry come from divorced or single-parent families? Do you track whether or not kids come from divorced or single-parent homes? How?
3. When you picture the kids in your ministry at home, what do you see? Do you imagine kids in homes similar to yours? Do you see them in traditional two-parent homes? Or, are you tuned in to the reality of today's kids?
4. Do you actively and consistently pray for the children in your minister who are touched by divorce that God would bring healing to them and that they would recognize that He is a Father who will never leave?
5. Do you have a means of reaching out to the "other" parent of children in your ministry who do not attend your church?
6. Does your church have any kind of mentorship program that can provide children of divorce with godly remodels in the event those models are missing from a child's life?
7. Do you consistently reach out to children and their families who are struggling through a divorce? Do you reach out emotionally? Do you reach out financially? Do you reach out spiritually?

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8. Do you have children in your ministry who attend multiple churches depending on which parent has custody? If so, have you reached out to the children's ministry leader(s) in the other church to discuss how you can work together to disciple the child in question?
9. Do you plan your special programs to make them more accessible for children from divorced homes?
10. In considering appropriate discipline measures, do you factor in a child's circumstances in the home?
11. When planning for curriculum, how do you ensure that children who can only be there every other week aren't left hopelessly behind?
12. Do you provide training for your volunteers on working with children from divorced or single-parent homes?
13. Are you engaging in practices such as attendance charts or rewards for scripture memory which are inherently biased against children who cannot consistently attend your church?
14. Do you, or your volunteers, make kids feel uncomfortable or alienated because they miss weeks?
15. Have you checked your language to ensure that it is not alienating children of divorce and from single-parent families and parents? For example, are your take home pages still titled "Parent Pages?" Do you tell kids that they can have their treat when "Mom or Dad" picks them up? Do you ever encourage kids to talk to "Mom and Dad" about that?
16. In planning your lessons, do you account for the fact that children of divorce often face challenges understanding certain Bible stories and applications (e.g., The Story of the Prodigal Son) because their life experience is so different?
17. Are you consistently pointing kids to Jesus Christ as their Savior and source of ultimate healing?