

SINGLE PARENTS - UNDERSTANDING AND ASSISTING

She is sitting in your office crying, feeling hopeless and helpless. Angrily she tells you a story of an ex-spouse who drinks heavily and lies to the children, of not receiving child support payments, of teachers telling her that her son is causing trouble because he does not live in a stable environment, and of working at a low-paying job and not making enough money to support her children and herself.

Unfortunately, the above scene is becoming more common every day. The problems are not exaggerated. Increasingly more parents are raising their children alone, without the help and support of a spouse. The number of single parent families has doubled in the last ten years. It is estimated that by 1990 about 44% of all children under 18 will be living with one parent. About 89% of single parent families are headed by women. The following is a 1984 breakdown of who was heading single parent families:

Divorced mothers	37%	Divorced fathers	6%
Never-married mothers	25%	Never-married fathers	2%
Separated mothers	18%	Separated fathers	2%
Widows	7%	Widowers	1%

The fastest growing group of single parents is the never-married.

The Christian two-parent family has long been considered the definition of the "ideal" family and the cornerstone of the church. If the church concentrates its efforts on ministering to this "ideal" group only, it may be neglecting a growing part of its membership -- single people, single parent families, and blended families.

ISSUES OF SINGLE PARENTS

It is difficult to generalize about single parents since they are a very diverse group. Non-custodial divorced fathers would not be expected to have much in common with never-married custodial mothers. Yet, there are some issues shared by most single parents just because they are single and parents. The following are issues often cited as problems in the lives of many single parents:

Finances

Single custodial mothers generally cite finances as one of their major problems. Currently about half of the families headed by women are living below what is regarded as the poverty level. Generally, single mothers earn about half as much as males do. Following a

divorce, the average single mother suffers a 73% drop in income while men experience a 42% rise.

Custodial mothers, because of childcare obligations, may not be able to work overtime and may have to take off work when a child is ill. They might also have to pass up different job opportunities because of their circumstances at home. Employers may not want to hire a female single parent for fear that she will quit her job for the first man who comes along and promises to support her.

Many single custodial mothers have very few job skills. Some never-married mothers were teenagers or very young adults when they had their first child. Many left high school before graduating. Some who did graduate were kept too busy with parenting and trying to earn a living to learn new job skills.

Many divorced or widowed custodial mothers never lived on their own before marriage. They went from being supported by their parents to being supported by their husbands. Never having had to manage and cope on their own, some of these single mothers find it difficult to compete in the job market and to handle the various other aspects of single parenting.

Welfare is not the single parents' panacea from financial problems. Most welfare recipients do not like receiving welfare. The forms to fill out are confusing, benefits are minimal or in some cases delayed, and the recipient must put up with rules and regulations which reduce privacy and independence. It is generally humiliating for single mothers to admit that they cannot make it on their own. Many welfare mothers feel "less" than other people, stigmatized by the public as "lazy welfare leeches." Generally, the public has little sympathy for people on welfare and looks down on them.

Child support by the non-custodial parent is supposed to help alleviate the financial burdens of the custodial parent. However, in reality, over 50% of single custodial mothers receive no child support; 25% receive partial payment and only about 20% receive full payment most of the time.

Feelings of guilt, anger and depression

Many single parents suffer from feelings of guilt. These feelings can originate from many sources. Commonly, single parents may feel guilty that they are not providing their children with a two-parent home and financial security. In some way they may feel that they are failing their children by not being the "ideal, middle class" family.

Some divorced single parents feel guilty because of a failed marriage. Typically, after divorce, feelings of guilt and failure will surface. They may feel that they have not lived up to the expectations of God, others, or themselves.

For the never-married parents, feelings of guilt may arise from their past or present lifestyle and the fact that their children are not considered legitimate.

Single parents may also suffer from "working parent" guilt and from "latchkey guilt." They may feel that they are neglecting their children.

Guilt feelings that are not dealt with may lead to depression. They may also leave parents open to manipulation by their children. In feeling that they are giving their children a rotten deal, some single parents may feel sorry for their children and not discipline them in accordance with God's will.

Many single parents are angry at their life circumstances. They may be angry at God because of a bad shake and unanswered prayers. They may even feel that God has deserted them.

Custodial parents typically harbor anger against non-custodial parents for not paying child support and for not cooperating. Non-custodial parents may be angry at having to pay child support while not being able to see their children as often as they would like. Many non-custodial parents feel cut out of their children's lives, causing them hurt, sadness and anger. They may feel that they will be replaced if the custodial parent marries. Some non-custodial parents choose to not visit their children because of their personal pain and anger. They need to deal with these feelings and go through a grieving process to mourn the loss of their family, children and dreams associated with this family.

Studies have shown that fathers without custody who have recovered fastest from divorce were those who were busy making a home for their children and making arrangements for visits. Contact with the children resulted in fathers feeling less inadequate, angry and depressed and feeling a part of their children's lives again.

Anger sometimes covers up other emotions such as hurt and feelings of inadequacy. Anger may also be an attempt to hold on to an ex-spouse. It keeps the parent emotionally invested in the other's life. If post-divorce anger goes on for a long time and seems inappropriate, it may be a sign that the person has not "let go."

The depression rate is high in single parents. anger, guilt, stress, and financial difficulties help contribute to the high depression rate. Depressed parents usually have a hard time functioning in life and as parents.

Dealing with an ex-spouse

Many single parents will state that dealing constructively with their ex-spouse is a major problem. Some marriages end in much anger and bitterness which go on long after the divorce papers are signed. The ex-spouses may "play games" with each other and drag the children into the mess.

It can be particularly hard on Christian single parents whose non-Christian ex-spouses now expose their children to undesirable influences. The Christian single parent may fear that the Christian values they want their children to embrace will be undermined by their ex-spouse. Degrading and speaking badly of their ex-spouses in front of their children are not productive and teach the children lack of respect.

Non-custodial parents may fail to properly discipline their children because they do not want to spend the short amount of time they have with their children disciplining them. This may make it harder for the custodial parent to properly discipline. Different rules in each household may confuse the children.

Parenting

Most parents are concerned about their children and how they are being trained and nurtured. Single parents are no different than married parents in this respect. Being a good parent is a difficult job. It has been shown that single parents can do a good job of raising their children. The emotional health and attitudes of custodial parents greatly affect the emotional health of their children. Custodial parents with good self-images and positive attitudes greatly help the adjustment and happiness of their children.

Security and a safe, stable environment are important for children. Single parents should strive to provide stability in their children's lives. Sometimes this is difficult when their own lives are unstable and changeable. Being the sole source of emotional and financial support for their children may be overwhelming for some single parents.

Good communication is important in families, whether they are two-parent or single-parent families. Parents who openly talk to their children about divorce and other important issues and listen non-judgmentally to what their children have to say can help in establishing and maintaining a healthy family life.

God assigned parents the responsibility of bringing up their children in the Lord. Single parents are no exception. Bringing their children to church and Sunday School and striving to lead a Christian life are just as much the responsibility of single parents as married parents. Single parents can do a good job in seeing that their children get a good spiritual foundation.

Identity, Self-Esteem

Many people have problems with self-esteem and identity. Feeling important in a world with false, sinful values can be difficult. The best way for people to feel good about themselves is to have a close relationship with God.

Never-married single parents may be looked down upon by others as immoral and unimportant. These parents need to know of God's love and

forgiveness. As children of God they can rise above their past sins and can go on to do God's will.

Formerly married single parents need to come to grips with a new identity. They are no longer wives or husbands, but now singles. Feelings of loneliness, pain and incompleteness may be present. Asking God for help and trusting in His love and understanding can help single parents put their lives together and feel better about themselves.

HOW TO HELP

Many single parents could benefit from a larger network of family, friends and neighbors whom they could call on if needed. Encourage them to increase their support network and ask for help if they need it. Church-sponsored groups for single parents can be formed to aid single parents spiritually, socially, and emotionally. Combining Bible studies, discussions of relevant issues and social outings may provide the added support and network single parents need.

As pastors, you can help single parents know that they and their children are not second class citizens in the church. Impress on them the fact that God loves them and will not desert them. Help them to feel welcome and accepted into the church. Try to find ways for them to help out in the church, Sunday school, Christian day school, etc. Help dispel any negative feelings which other church members may have toward single parents.

Encourage single parents to try to "get along" with their ex-spouses for their children's sake. They must keep their children out of their "games" and fights. One of the best things parents can do for their children is to get their acts together and work together for the welfare of their children. Most of the problems children of divorce have are extensions of their parents' problems.

The following are suggestions you might share with divorced parents to help them with their parenting:

1. Do not try to be both parents.
2. Be a parent rather than a buddy or a big brother or sister.
3. Be honest with your children.
4. Do not put down your ex-spouse in front of your children.
5. Do not make your children spies who report on the ex-spouse's activities.
6. Children need love from both parents. Do not deny them this right.
7. Try not to disrupt the many areas in your children's lives that offer them security and safety.
8. Listen to your children. Try to understand their feelings. Set times to talk together about normal day-to-day happenings, not just crises.
9. Do not force your children to choose between you and your ex-spouse.
10. If you have a problem with your ex-spouse, keep it between the two of you. Communicate directly with each other.

11. Be responsible in keeping the agreed upon times for visitation.
12. Lead a life in accordance with God's Word. Be a good model for your children.

Pastors and teachers can work together to make Christian schools more sensitive to single parent families. They can be aware of some of the problems single parents and their children face. The schools might consider making use of WELS elementary school counselors to help deal with the special issues children struggle with. Possibly, after school activities could be arranged by the school so that the children can remain and be supervised until parents come home from work. Each church might try setting up a program similar to the Big Brothers or Big Sisters programs. Christian adults of the congregation might be able to volunteer some time for a child with an absent parent.

A babysitting network might be set up by some of the ladies and teens of the congregation to help parents find adequate care for their children and give them some time off.

Some single parents try to do too much. They try to be "superparents" and want to be both father and mother to their children. This is humanly impossible. Encourage them to slow down and set priorities. They may have to let go of certain activities that are less important. let them know that it is okay to take time for themselves to relax, regroup and enjoy themselves. You might suggest that they attend workshops on stress, time management or budgeting.

Some single parents will think that a new man or woman will solve their problems -- the knight in shining armor premise. Out of loneliness, need or fear they may enter into a new relationship that might not be right for them or their children. You can help them sort things out so that they do not enter into a new relationship for the wrong reasons. They need to first learn from their mistakes in past relationships before a new one is entered into.

Being a single parent is a difficult task. But with help from the Lord, and support from loved ones and friends, single parents and their children can lead happy, productive Christian lives.

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