

Ministering to Teens of Divorcing or Divorced Parents

by Irene C. B. Viorritto

In the United States, approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce and of those, 60% involve children. Divorce or separation can be one of the most painful experiences in a child's life, regardless of age. Research shows that even five years later only one-third of affected children are described as doing well: having good self-esteem and coping successfully with school, friends, and home. Another third have some adjustment issues, including bouts of unhappiness, low self-esteem, and anger. A final third of these children are still extremely unhappy, angry, dissatisfied with life, often depressed and deeply lonely.¹

As youth ministry leaders, we clearly have our work cut out for us regarding these suffering teens! Before we can help the teen through this agonizing time in their life, we must understand the emotional state and responses of the teens during and after a separation or divorce.

Middle School students (9-12 years old)

Students in this age group are developing a basic ability to see various points of view in a situation and most are able to understand some of the reasons for the divorce; they will seriously and bravely try to make the best of it. As a Director of Youth Ministry (DYM), it is important to know that students will often cover up their distress in order to “protect” the feelings of their residential parent. (e.g. they will not request to see Dad more often, despite missing him terribly, because of Mom’s expressed anger towards him and not wanting to cause her more anxiety). It is important to listen to what the student is *saying* and what the student is *not saying* – we can advocate for the student as a “disinterested party” from the divorce proceedings.

Approximately 25% of youth in this age group will become an ally of one parent; even though they can better understand both sides of a dispute than their younger siblings, they still tend to see things in black and white terms. This results in a need to label one parent as the “good guy” and the other the “villain”, perhaps because they still fear abandonment and don’t want to alienate the parent they are idolizing.² This age group often has the “Parent Trap” fantasy: trying to undo the separation, perhaps to counteract their own sense of powerlessness.³ Other common experiences in this age group are:

- **Intense anger** - Not only because of the separation, but often because they see a double standard in the parent’s behavior – e.g. a visible inconsistency between the parents as disciplinarians and then (at least in the teen’s eyes) acting inappropriately or selfishly themselves.
- **Shaken Identity**
- **Physical Complaints or Problems** including infections, asthma, headaches, stomachaches, etc. – if the CYM serves in a teaching capacity and notices a student being sick or absent frequently, this could be a red-flag that the situation at home is causing the teen stress.
- **Peer-relationship problems**- fewer friends, sense of less support among friends, greater fear of peer rejection. These students are more likely, out of loneliness, to choose friends who have been rejected by normal peers and have emotional/behavioral difficulties.
- **Abuse of power** - Students of this age are beginning to understand cause-and-effect relationships on a small-picture scale and may act out using this new “power” to emotionally hurt one or both parents via mean words, accusations, or refusing to spend time with a parent

they consider more “blameworthy”. This should not be accepted and as DYM’s, we can reinforce the need to be civil and polite to both parents. With the parents we can help the student understand that they do control their own feelings and encourage the parents to give the preteen some measure of control over minor aspects (bring a friend along on a trip, choose an activity, elect when to call the other parent, etc).

High School students (13-18 years old)

Adolescents are more socially and intellectually developed, making them more equipped to deal with the family break-up. The primary social orientation for adolescents is their peer group rather than the family, which may in fact mask many of the problems they encounter. As DYM’s, we may be more likely to pick up on these masked problems since we have the opportunity to observe the teen in more social and peer-oriented situations. During parental conflict, teens react differently than their younger siblings: boys report more sad feelings, girls report more angry feelings. Both may result in a loss of parental influence, and greater reliance on peers or social isolation.

One of the biggest problems is the loss of the parent-child relationship, a major support during the time of great personal and social turmoil of adolescence. For many teens, the lack of consistency in discipline and controls between parents is unsettling and in the absence of a healthy parental model, they may be hurt by unhealthy models or turn to unrealistic models portrayed in the media or by their peer group. Often, teenagers will act out their anger and frustration by getting involved with delinquency, deviant peers, substance abuse, and sexual risk-taking (especially among girls). Teens often have difficulty paying attention and concentrating, so grades usually suffer, and many, especially boys, may have behavioral problems. All of these can lower a teen’s sense of self-worth and increase distress over the break up, so it is important to praise them often and genuinely for personal achievements.

In a single-parent home, many teens find it necessary to grow up faster – often assuming greater responsibilities than they otherwise would at this age. (e.g. caring for younger siblings, or caring for emotionally overwhelmed parents) About a third of these teens become more involved in family life, whereas another third of these teens become removed from family life.⁴

Teens typically acquire new thinking abilities that allow them to understand how systems work (family, government, etc.), although oversimplified and idealized, and will experience outrage and moral indignation when things don’t work right. They are more likely to feel helpless, powerless, and frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of respect for their feelings by the parent(s), the court, or “the system” than their younger siblings. Along with parents, the DYM can acknowledge the teen’s views and the reality of their anger while, at the same time, challenging their assumptions about the underlying causes of the problems.⁵ Encouraging and equipping parents to model good communication (active listening and giving feedback in an effective way), compromise, and perseverance is critical for DYM’s.

We as DYM’s know, and are often challenged by, the fact that teens have a sixth sense for dishonesty, manipulation and double standards. It is extremely important to help parents understand the need to be open and honest in their communication and consistent in their supervision and discipline skills.



How Can the Church Help?

Emotional Support for Parents

- Create a support group, provide counseling and friendship
- Let teachers and counselors know what is happening (details not required/appropriate)
- Give both parents copies of grades, records, communications, etc.
- Provide general parenting skills classes
- Give extra reminders
- Help to arrange carpools
- Provide supervised activities
- Ask for specifics on all emergency forms

Support for Students

- Create a divorce support group for teens.
- Take a greater interest in teen's activities and encourage discussion.
- Recognize that a parent's sexual activity may cause sexual activity (especially in girls), earlier and more often.
- Offer single sex small groups (boys need the masculine activities and cognitive stimulation).
- Offer Catholic Life Communities (CLCs) with same gender adult as a regular contact
- Teach about sex-role identification, approval/interest of older male authority figure → self-confidence/worth.
- Expose both boys and girls to a father's love.
- Support boys and girls that have impairments in social behaviors with a father's absence.⁶
- Encourage a non-resident parent to be a chaperone (if appropriate).
- Encourage consistency between homes
- Do not display attendance trackers for youth who may only attend church, youth groupings or religious education when they are with one parent but not the other
- Have youth ministry couples model healthy relationships
- Use the God-Church relationship as a model for Marriage Man-Wife

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¹ Donald A. Gordon and Jack Arbuthnot. What About the Children, 6th ed. (Athens, OH: The Center for Divorce Education, 2008) 6.

² Ibid. p. 9

³ Ibid. p. 9

⁴ Ibid. p. 10-11

⁵ Ibid. p. 12

⁶ Ibid. p.33