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The Single Parents: What Do They Want?

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INTRODUCTION

"The number of single parents—parents without partners—is growing. Over 8.5 million children under age 18 years (30 percent of them under 6) are being raised in one-parent families in this country. That is one out of every seven American children. There are about 4.2 million one-parent families in this country as compared to 25 million nuclear or two-parent families. The growth rate of single parent families has increased by 31.4% in the past ten years, almost three times the growth of two-parent families.

Some men and women choose to raise children alone, but most find the situation thrust upon them unwillingly by death, divorce or separation. Though many men are rearing children alone, most single-parent families are headed by women. Of the women who were heads of households in a recent year, government figures show that 37% were widows, 26% were divorced, 24% were separated from their husbands, and 13% had never been married.

Whatever the reason for their singleness, single parents all share the special difficulties of raising children alone in a society based on the traditional two-parent home. For children problems can center around their feeling of being different from their friends who have two parents. For the parent, problems include the feeling of isolation and loneliness, as well as the more practical difficulties of day to day rearing without a partner." (Riley Jr., Dr. Harris D., and Karen L. Woodworth, M.A. "The Single Parent—Going It Alone." American Baby, June, 1977. pp. 58-59.)

"What am I going to do with the single parents in my ward or stake?" This question seems to be a common one among bishops and stake presidents in the LDS Church. The essence of this question also appears to be plaguing leaders of other secular groups and government agencies.

In the helping services field, there are numerous theories to define and attempts to provide solutions for the problems of the single parent.

The purpose of this paper is to provide additional information to enhance your professional repertoire of experiences. The intent of this information is to help the single parent and other LDS members understand and communicate with each other and to realize that each is striving to live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why do professionals in the helping services have difficulty dealing with the single parent? Why do clergymen and agency counselors, in turn, find impasses in their relationship with the singles?

Obviously, there are few easy answers to these questions. There are ideas and descriptions of feelings in this paper that may shed light on one's understanding and experiences.

The initial material and examples were taken from case work, counseling interviews, and current research. However, one of the pronounced problems of the counselor is the identification with the single parent. This material was, therefore, initiated, researched, and compiled with constant input by single parents living in the State of Utah. Continued evaluation and change was provided by members of the Utah Valley LDS Multi-Region Special Interest Group, comprising over 10,000 members. A questionnaire was used as initial reference material. This attitudinal survey was distributed and collected at a multi-regional fireside held March, 1975. Five hundred questionnaires were handed out. Of those returned, 376 were usable.

The final information check was made by reviewing the data collected with over 150 single parents during a four-month period.

The arrangement of the information, in order, includes: description of three cases, a section on the needs as expressed by single parents, a section on suggestions for single parents, and a section on suggestions for ward and stake leaders.

Cases of Single Parents

Case #1

My husband left me for another woman when I...
was 28; we had three children, ages 9, 7, and 4. We lived in a nice home in a wealthy ward. Our Bishop helped us with groceries, part-time work, and when my husband wouldn't pay child support, the bishop helped me sell the home rather than lose it.

We bought a modest home on the other side of town. When I talked to our bishop there, he told me we lived in a poor ward and there were about 15 families like myself. “The best thing for you is to get a job.” During the next two years, I talked to a stake member (professional social worker) who helped me get a job, counseled me on children's needs and especially my feelings of bitterness. I had done nothing bad enough to deserve what had happened. My husband has since been disfellowshipped and I’ve received a temple cancellation. The Relief Society sisters helped tend my children until I made enough money to pay them. I was still lonely and so became involved in PTA for my children and spent recreation time with them. The more I’ve been able to feel happy with my life and what I’m accomplishing, the less bitter I am. The family also feels better. We still have problems; we just don’t look at them as unsolvable crises. My children depend on my mood. They are very sensitive; if I am happy, then they are too.

At first, I also felt sorry for myself and kept asking myself why this happened. This seems to be a typical reaction for people who feel sorry for themselves. Now I ask myself what happened, how Jim and I treated each other, and promise myself that it won’t happen again.

Case #2

George and I never did get along. We had five children in five years. I was always pregnant and he was always angry. We had some pretty bad fights. Well, we are divorced, and I am going to make it better for the kids.

We were married at the age of eighteen. Maybe that had something to do with it. I’m looking for a father for my children but I’m cautious; I don’t want another George. College has been important to me. I only go half-time so that I can spend time with my little children. Church—yes, we went sometimes, and my children have always gone. Now I depend on the church more than I did before. Yes, I’m lonely sometimes. I can recall a professor speaking at our Special Interest Fireside. He said, “You really shouldn’t be alone; general authorities, stake presidents, and bishops re-marry in a short period of time.” Who is he kidding? I’ve been waiting 5 years for a man like that to marry me; but since I don’t do the asking, I’m still waiting.

Case #3

Charlotte had breast cancer. No matter what we tried she kept getting worse. Three months before she died, she delivered our third child, a frail little girl. I had been serving in the bishopric and busy in real estate. I realized that Charlotte had really cared for our children. Jason, 4 years, Janet, 2 years, and Charlotte, 3 months old, were now my responsibility. The Relief Society and relatives really helped. I finally asked to be released from my church responsibilities. I became depressed trying to work, keep clean clothes, feed the children, and tend the baby at night. Charlotte and I had worked together well as a team. Sometimes I felt sorry for myself, and I missed her so much. I seem more disorganized now. Sure, I guess I’m looking for a wife. I almost married a woman with four children, but what a responsibility! I was so used to Charlotte, and now I’m very unsure about other women. How do I know they’ll really like me after we’re married? What if I don’t like them? Will they be as accepting of my faults as Charlotte was? I don’t want to compare, but I do want to be happy with another woman, not just live with her. The gospel is very important to me but the value of my children was more important than service in the bishopric. Besides, others were doing a lot of my work which was a burden on them. I guess I can truthfully say that after three years I’m just reorganizing my life and adjusting to my role as a provider, father, and mother, to my children. The women of our ward really helped me, especially when I didn’t care much about my children. when I was hurting; and I’m grateful for that.
SECTION II

This section is a sampling of statements or requests made by single people. One dominant attitude among a large number of singles is the lack of guidance and empathy from their church authority (bishops/stake presidents). Upon concluding an interview with a single person, the religious counselor often gives panacea advice: (1) “You need to fast and pray,” (2) “You need to be involved with the singles group,” (3) “What you need is a husband/wife.” This is good, general advice; however asking a person how they feel and then listening to their needs, already provides a therapeutic aura that doesn’t require an instant answer.

What We Would Appreciate (responses from single persons):

#1
We would appreciate acceptance. In gospel classes or church meetings where there is a discussion of temple marriage; hardly ever is there a discussion (or acceptance) of a single parent also having a temple recommend and raising their children in the gospel.

#2
We are healthy. Many people stress, and sometimes we accept their saying, we can’t be happy if we’re not remarried. We believe that we may progress even if we are single and strive for celestial goals as we seek an eternal companion.

#3
Our children are normal. One mother stated “When I had a husband and my children were rowdy the ward members were usually tolerant. Now that I’m divorced, many members want to save me and my children: they shake their head knowingly and say “we understand why Johny is in so much trouble.”

#4
We have our ups and downs. Sometimes we are happy, angry, bitter, or depressed. This also happens to married couples.

#5
We have a place in the LDS Church. As children of our Father in Heaven, we have a right to be accepted as individuals. We are normal. As one young lady stated, “I don’t want people to separate me from other ward members. I’m a member, too.”

SECTION III

The following are suggestions for the single parent. These suggestions are not only directed toward the single parent, but are offered to the helping individual as a checklist for ways of giving support to the single person.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SINGLE PARENTS

1. Initially seek help from responsible church officials, LDS Social Services, etc.
2. Plan for the future.
   a. Develop a monetary budget.
   b. Employment plan for your future.
   c. Health services for you and the children.
   d. Recreation and activity for the family and individual family members.
   e. A single parent needs to make out a will and make arrangements for what will happen to minor children. (Going to an ex-husband or wife may not be the best thing—in cases of a widow or widower, grandparents may be too old.) It is difficult to think about but necessary!
   f. Immediate hold weekly (formal) interviews with your children, to discuss their needs.
   g. Consider Your Needs. Keep yourself as attractive as possible. It will help you attract attention from the opposite sex, but more important, this will help you feel good about yourself.

Example: I indulge in a weekly “devoted-to-Ellen night.” After the kids are safely in bed I take a leisurely hot bubble bath, do my hair, nails, put
on a pretty robe, and listen to music or read or rest in front of a good TV show.

Consider the fears and concerns of the children. Use good judgment, and discuss the loss your children feel. Don't wait for them to ask because they may not. Make certain that the child's feasible needs are met. This will also be therapeutic to you.

You're an individual. Be fair to yourself. Take good physical care of yourself. Being alone may be a shock; still make an effort to seek companionship through church activity, recreation, etc.

SECTION IV

Being single, over 26, and a single parent presents challenges (not problems) that Church leaders need to evaluate carefully in dealing with these groups. Each person's needs and challenges are unique. Those needs and challenges blended with the total individual provide the basis of a realistic assessment.

The following are a series of suggestions aimed at providing thought prior to dealing with the single parent.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WARD, STAKE LEADERS

1. Utilize single parents in the ward or stake, based on their skills.
2. Let them discuss their fears, concerns, and worries. Don't project problems to them because they are a single parent.
3. Help them with basics, food, clothing, shelter, employment, transportation, etc. This will help rid them of anxieties, and depression.
4. Focus on the strengths a single parent portrays by holding a temple recommend, striving to live the Gospel, and raising children alone. Let them see they are accepted.
5. Treat them as a person in your congregation, not as a minority with problems.
6. Don't counsel extensively with them. Utilize the stake or church social services component. Do utilize the principle of fellowshipping to help them feel accepted.
7. We don't want home teachers to ever visit us without companions.
8. "We need basic help" a single mother of five suggested, "I want a home teacher who will help:"
   a. fix a light switch
   b. suggest the type of new tires for my car
   c. help trim trees in my yard
   d. be a father for my son on special ward outings
   e. help do what a father might so the children don't feel the loss so deeply
9. Many programs in the LDS Church, lesson plans, songs, etc., are geared to the two-parent family. This is good because we are a family-oriented church. But there are one-parent families within the church. The children in these homes often feel like sore thumbs when other children point them out as being different. My son came home one day and related how his classmates acted when he stated he didn't have a father. "Poor Scott" was the feeling. But Scott said he didn't know he was a "poor anything." The point is that other people had to bring out that he was different.
10. There should be programs for Primary, Sunday School, MIA, etc. that acknowledges the one-parent situation within the church. (We sometimes feel like the black sheep that are being hidden.) A one-parent family is not ideal, but it does exist and we are not "freaks," nor do we want pity—only acceptance.
11. Fellowshipping is so important. If a special interest person is invited to a ward or stake function where there will be mostly couples, they should be included in small group conversations and helped to feel welcome.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this paper, there are points that may well be restated. Firstly, the single parent has a need to see oneself as a human being and have the confidence of identifying with other human beings. Secondly, the person has an imperative need to be outside of self; to be a part of others' lives. Thirdly, there is a need to have primary communication skills shared with others; to share communication not solely by mouth to ear, but communication by a touch, smile, the warmth of friendship, and other subliminal means. Fourthly, a need to regroup feelings is vital; to learn that a positive attitude is possible, living can be exciting and not just tolerated, and the single person does indeed have a contribution to make in the LDS gospel plan. Lastly, the single person has the potential to become whatever or whoever he/she wants to be.