Counseling Divorced LDS Single Parent Fathers

Edwin G. Brown

Au-Deane S. Cowley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol3/iss1/3
Counseling Divorced LDS Single Parent Fathers

Edwin G. Brown, Ph.D.
Au-Deane S. Cowley, Ph.D.

Divorce is not an unusual phenomenon, even in the Church. Its frequency makes it a significant family process and counselors are apt to spend a great deal of time helping families through the grief and hopefully onto growth. Divorce can be a constructive solution to family pain—or a shock and devastating disappointment. During the process of divorce, there are certain fundamental generalizable tasks that must be resolved. This paper will deal with counselor tasks in helping divorced single parent fathers resolve the stages of divorce, and move onto a new parenting role—either as the visiting or custodial parent. Major practice principles and concepts will be discussed in terms of their implication and adaptation for use by L.D.S. counselors and L.D.S. clients.

According to Wiseman, divorce resolution can be divided into five overlapping stages: (1) denial; (2) loss and depression; (3) anger and ambivalence; (4) re-orientation of lifestyle and identity; and (5) acceptance and integration (Wiseman, 205-212).

1. Denial—Denial as a defense mechanism begins during the “emotional divorce” period, which usually precedes the actual legal divorce. Some marriages remain together even though the couple is emotionally divorced, in a kind of “empty shell” or cared house marriage (Bach, 1969). This is a common occurrence in L.D.S. families, because of the strong emphasis on the family unit as an eternal union. Divorce action, often triggered by a precipitating event, puts the family into crisis. This results in a justification for taking action. Due to pervasive support from the Church to keep marriages and family intact, for active L.D.S. couples the precipitating event is frequently of a more serious nature. Not uncommonly, the precipitating event is a serious infraction of Church doctrine, such as infidelity. This infraction has dual repercussions in the Ward as well as the family. Where one’s Church membership is put in jeopardy, it may be used to rule out any chances for reconciliation. Counselors working with such a family will have to help family members resolve their anger and pain about disfellowship or excommunication, as well as the feelings about the act of infidelity. One spouse must cope with feelings of being betrayed and devalued while the other feels unworthy and worthless. Children are the innocent victims of such a situation and will require counseling support to deal with their own anger, pain and fear.

Often part of owning reality and not denying the marital problems anymore includes re-evaluation of the entire marriage. Active Mormons not uncommonly take Church doctrine about celestial marriage and perfection to set up unrealistic expectations for their current stage of development. As a result, there is no place for conflict in marriage and family, only guilt when conflict emerges as a result of everyday life. This situation denies what we know professionally to be true, namely that there are predictable life crises, and that conflict is inevitable. Therefore, instead of using the self expectation of managing conflict constructively, such couples are consumed with guilt for having such human frailties. Any reality in the marriage that is in violation of Church teachings will precipitate this kind of stress. One reality that is often owned when dissolution of the marriage seems eminent is the anger expressed by couples as to why they were married in the first place.

If premarital pregnancy was the cause (71% of the marriages in Salt Lake City), this is sometimes used by either or both of the parties as a scapegoat or excuse for their marital infidelity and/or other destructive behaviors. It’s easy to rationalize that a forced marriage justifies irresponsible, immature actions.

The examples cited above illustrate the paradox that the Church’s strong religious values not only bring about a marriage but they may also contribute to its demise. Counselors need to be aware of this situation so as to mitigate the “double divorce” phenomenon that occurs when members leave their marriage and leave the Church simultaneously.

2. Loss and Depression—This second stage of the divorce is related to the separation, anxiety and grief reaction caused by loss of roles, relationships, status, friends, one’s partner, and usually, for the man, his children and home. Such dramatic changes interrupt familiar habit patterns and ways of living everyday life. The divorcing L.D.S. couple may feel a loss of face with respect to the Church President McKay’s oft quoted remarks: “No success in life can compensate for failure in the home” and feel this is no longer an ideal but a resounding chastisement which reinforces
feelings of inadequacy.

Regardless of how bad the relationship was—it did order one’s life and losing it may precipitate some drastic reactions. Sometimes the feeling that “all is lost” leads to a sort of hedonism that may look on the surface like selfishness or immaturity, but often masks despair. All of the associative behaviors of “a fallen person” may occur as the “guilty” party plays the role of the “sinful person.” The “wronged” spouse may even begin to act out in retaliation or in an effort to get even. During this stage, both may be hampered in their constructive coping efforts by fatigue and feelings of hopelessness. The counselor has an important contribution to make by acting as an alter-ego. The client needs sustaining and support with regard to his/her personal worth and concerning the prospects for a future, especially as it pertains to the Church. One goal in the helping endeavor is to prevent acting out behaviors (or at least minimize them) that result from feelings of despair and restlessness.

3. Anger and ambivalence is the third stage of working through a divorce. After denial is resolved and the depression is over, the anger will be expressed more directly. Sometimes interaction between spouses at this point is vindictive, punitive, or even violent. They may not only be expressing anger at each other more openly, but also at those who have taken sides during their problems. Sometimes anger is vented at the Church for not helping them more, and/or at those who have taken sides during their problems. Sometimes anger is vented at the Church for not helping them more, and/or at those in the Church who tried to help and failed. This period includes feelings of alienation and isolation. It is a purging time and a time to combat the ambivalence about whether or not to divorce that suddenly and surprisingly may surface. The practicality issues arise and sometimes one or both of the parties vacillate between returning to the familiar, unhappy situation and feeling the fear of the unknown. If they continue on the divorcing track they will need to work through stage four. L.D.S. counselors may experience conflicts themselves and begin to represent a position of non-divorce rather than allow the clients to resolve this stage for themselves. L.D.S. people are very conscious of leads from persons in authority positions. This orientation may cause couples in conflict to assign more authority in the decision-making to the counselor than this phase of the divorcing process would indicate.

4. Reorientation of Life Style and Identity—For many L.D.S., being a non-married person in the Church is like living in limbo. They try to see the non-married state as transitory. This may be a defense
against feelings of social stigma and of “not being O.K.” During this stage, divorcing couples are vulnerable in many areas. For some, this stage reflects a choice point—they may reorganize their life in harmony with the Church or in antagonism to the Church. They may form a new relationship on a rebound to avoid facing the reality of being alone or avoid social contacts altogether. Time is an important factor. As counselors, we should encourage divorcing couples to leave time to grow and to take stock, and above all, not to be in such a hurry to remarry and to reconstruct their lives that they make unwise decisions.

The many problems confronting divorced persons often put them back into a real identity crisis. They must ask, “Who am I apart from my spouse?” For those who married young and only know the identity of husband and father, it may require the fundamental task of defining, “Who do I want to be?” The identity crisis associated with divorce includes the whole problem of being faced with a redefinition of one’s sexual self. Within the bonds of marriage, sexual expression is endorsed by the Church. After the divorce, these same behaviors are taboo. It is important for the counselors to initiate discussions with clients in this area that is often avoided.

The counseling task in this phase is to help the client to define a life style that is congruent for him and to help him to keep a ‘here and now’ focus. He can be enabled to learn from the past but must be careful to not carry the past into the present.

5. Acceptance and Integration—As the fifth and final stage, the work here is to guide the client to discover and acknowledge “he’s O.K.,” and she’s O.K., too.” If final resolution is to be achieved, each person needs to reach a point of accepting himself as a divorced person with nothing to prove and no need to be defensive or reactionary. Many problems within remarriage occur because couples have failed to get thoroughly psychologically divorced, as well as legally. They must learn to accept their divorced state and develop a new social and personal identity (Wiseman, 205-212). Once the divorced father has reached the stage of integration, the Church as a formal organization becomes a valuable resource supporting remarriage efforts. Whereas in stage four, the counselor was trying to buffer the client from the press for remarriage, this is no longer necessary. Programs and group activities sponsored by the Church become resources for giving direction to the client during the stage of re-integration. Client self-acceptance is essential if these tangible resources are going to also be psychologically available.

Single Parenting Role

In nearly half-million families in the United States, the father is the primary parent. 8.4% OF CHILDREN IN ONE—PARENT DIVORCED FAMILIES RESIDE WITH THE FATHER (Gasser & Taylor, 1976, p. 397). Between 1964 and 1972, the number of divorced and separated fathers heading households alone increased by 71% (Orthner, Brown & Ferguson, p. 431). One could expect this trend to be accelerated as the women’s lib movements’ impact on the family is manifest.

There is an increasing recognition that fathers are as often the “psychological parent” in the family. When such families split—these fathers undergo unusual stress fearing that the mother will get custody and not meet the children’s psychological needs. Often men are unaware that in Utah as well as many other states they have as much right to custody of minor children as does the mother.

Two of the traditional roles divorced fathers should be instructed to maintain, whether they are the custodial parent or the visiting parent, are those of “provider” and “nurturer.” The common expectation for the father to remain the primary provider for the family after the divorce may produce stress and conflict for him. He is placed in the position of doubling the financial responsibilities of fatherhood. Some fathers report feeling valued only as “a walking pocketbook.” The divorced father paying alimony and child support may not be able to afford a second marriage—particularly if that also includes the additional burden of “acquired” children (Messinger, 1976). The nurturing role is one wherein the single parent father receives support from the L.D.S. Church. Men are encouraged to help in rearing the children and if the Family Home Evening program has been a part of his homelife, he has been given opportunities to develop expressive relationships with his children. Recent studies show that fathers are capable of being as nurturant with children as mothers (Parke & Garwin, p. 367). However, no matter how clear the expectation or how motivated the father, the skills for the nurturing role may be lacking. Counselors must be aware of the support and training many fathers will require if they are to successfully fulfill this role.

Single Parent Father as Visiting Parent

The most important question a counselor can help a single, visiting father to answer is, “When is my presence with the family helpful or a hindrance?” Each
visit with the children must be carefully planned and selected with due regard to timing. The counselor is responsible for exploring the father's reasons for the visit. Support should be extended for motivations related to the children's well-being. Expected outcomes from the visit should be specified and the means for accomplishing them explored. The reactions of the children and the former spouse should be anticipated to maximize constructive coping on the fathers part. In order for couples to carry out their difficult task of being parents together even though divorced, they must be able to put the welfare of their children above their own. This requires a mature resolution that may require counseling to achieve.

Visits with children should not be activity-centered all the time. Time should be planned so father and child can engage in meaningful interaction and communication of feelings. Work and study, as well as “fun” activities should be part of visits. The visiting father should be helped to understand how to manage visitation times so they don’t penalize either the child or the parents in terms of their own needs for other social contacts. Some children of divorced parents report they have no time for themselves after supporting mother all week and visiting dad all weekend. Also, if visits are restricted to weekends, they can drastically reduce father’s time for rest and recreation. Visits should never be used as a vehicle to romance or harass the ex-spouse.

The fact of being separated from his children may make the father more conscious of what he wants for his children. These goals and values should be discussed by both parents to avoid mixed messages to the child and to reduce undercutting of each parent's efforts. Divorce does not release parents of the responsibility for cooperative effort in their children’s behalf.

Single Parent Father as Custodian Parent

The traditional role of the father consists of such things as: strength, competence, wisdom, dependability, stability (Maxwell, 387-388). Some men are so sex-role stereotyped that they find it difficult to move out of the “keeping” role and into a more interactional, nurturing role when they are the custodial parent. They often experience conflict between the providing and nurturing roles. Guilt about working too many hours and not spending enough time with the children in the home is common. Contrary to expectations that the custodial father experiences pressure to get a housekeeper-wife to survive, studies show fathers can organize the family to meet its own housekeeping tasks in a self-sufficient manner. Three-fourths of fathers in one study needed no outside help (Orthner, Brown and Ferguson, p. 435). Most fathers felt capable and successful in their ability to be the primary parent for children. This independence of single parent father families should be supported as a healthy adjustment. Counselors should help single parent fathers to resist the pressure to marry for the sake of a housekeeper.

One problem occurs with such regularity for custodial fathers that it should receive special attention. This is a misinterpretation of the natural distance that often develops between father and adolescent daughter. Parents must be cautioned not to blame such developmental struggles onto the divorce.

Just as single parent women are encouraged to provide father figure models for their children, so should a counselor encourage single parent-custodial fathers to enlist the help of mother surrogates (i.e., the grandmothers, aunts, “big sisters.” Sunday School
and Primary teachers) to keep the female influence in the family. The Church is an excellent resource for this need. A father’s legacy to children can also include his ease in modeling traditionally “female” jobs himself, i.e., cooking, cleaning, and even ironing. This role flexibility is rapidly becoming a necessity for all “modern” families whether they are divorced or intact.

Below are some guidelines for successful single parenting from a book called, Growth Through Divorce (Smoke, 1976, pp. 60-66).

1. Don’t try to be both parents to your children. Trying to be super parent will only bring you frustration and fatigue. Improve what you are and don’t try to be what you are not.

2. Don’t force your children into playing the role of the departed partner. A child needs to be a child. They cannot fill an adult’s place, so don’t force them to.

3. Be the parent you are. (Not friend, buddy, pal, big sister or brother, etc.) Children deeply resent having their parents try to invade their world. They NEED a parent.

4. Be honest with your children. Richard Gardiner (The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce) “Half truths produce confusion and distrust, whereas truth, albeit painful, engenders trust and gives the child the security of knowing exactly where he stands. He is then in a position to handle situations effectively.”

5. Don’t put your ex-spouse down in front of your children. It’s a game that nobody wins and eventually causes the child to lose all respect for either parent.

6. Don’t make your children undercover agents who report on the other parent’s current activities. This puts children in a double-bind. A child has the right to privately enjoy a parent without feeling disloyal to the other parent.

7. The children of divorce need both a mother and a father. (Only exceptions are when parent might cause emotional or bodily harm to the child.) Don’t let your feelings about the departed parent deny your child the right to a continuing relationship with that parent.

8. Share your dating life and social interests with your children. They want to know how the relation­ship will affect them. Hiding your new social interests and not informing children is a greater threat than keeping them informed.

9. Help your children keep the good memories of your past marriage alive. You have no right to rob your children of their happy memories. Good memories are worth keeping. They help us become what we are and generate hope for the future.

10. Work out a management and existence structure for your children with your ex-spouse. When feelings cool and perspectives are regained, separated parents should be able to face the reality that child raising goes on and should go on as smoothly as possible for the welfare of the children. The Judge of the Superior Court in Santa Ana, California gives divorcing parents a brochure entitled, “Parents Are Forever.”

11. If possible, try not to disrupt the many areas in your children’s lives that offer them safety and security. The same house, school, friends, church and clubs will help maintain a balance that can offset to a degree the loss of a parent. If this is not possible—rehearse new situations and present them as an adventure—not a threat. Let them take part in decision making.

12. If your child does not resume normal development and growth in life within a year of the divorce, he/she may need the special care and help of a professional counselor. Some adjustment problems are normal. If negative patterns persist—seek help.

“Being a single parent is a skill to be learned.”

Remarriage:

Mormon counselors should help divorced clients resist the press for remarriage before the five stages of divorce have been completely resolved. L.D.S. clients often feel a push to remarry in order to regain a sense of status within the Church and the community. Not unlike other divorced persons, many remarry the same spouse. Regardless—remarriage should wait until the resolution of the divorce is accomplished. Divorcees should be cautious in remarrying anyone without counseling help. Particularly in remarrying the former spouse they may remarry for the same reasons as they married for the first time around. The instant replay may end with the same ineffective results as at first. As counselors restrain an urge to “match-make” and help support the moratorium rather than urging a premature re-entry. Six of seven will remarry within three years but should be forewarned and forearmed about the unique problems that research shows plague remarriages (Messinger, 1976).

Summary

Counseling divorced single parent fathers is a complex task. First comes the task of healing the psychic wounds of divorce, freeing the client from entrapment in the past and moving him toward the process of living constructively in the present (Drantzler, 1973, p. 76). Then, since the role of single parent father has not yet been institutionalized in terms of role clarity with explicit expected behaviors (Mendes, 1976, 440), the single parent father is in need of much support. The counselor and groups of other single parent fathers can provide the stability a
man may be reluctant to seek. Fatherhood can be "person-making" (Maxwell, 1976, p. 391), and counselors have found that playing a contributing part in that process can be most rewarding.

REFERENCES


I looked about me and made a feeble effort to feel, I spoke a few meaningless words to folks nearby. I sensed the unexciting rituals so much a part of life. Then, you appeared within the crowd, As if from nowhere, Your creator unknown and unseen. You, perhaps, are the answer to the unspoken prayer, The sparkling reality to replace the empty dream.

Lester N. Downing