

Little people need a big people advocate during the holidays

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When I was growing up, we went to my grandmother's for holiday events. I remember when our entire family, including all the cousins, came together at Christmas, there were always two eating areas. One was in the kitchen at the kitchen table, and that's where all the kids or, as my grandfather would say, "the little people" would eat. At the nice dining-room table with all the food was where the big people sat.

We carried on that tradition when I grew up, and my siblings and I had children. There were always the kids' table and the adults' table at my mother's house. As the kids grew up and got tall, they were still called the little people and still sat at the little people's table. As the kids got older, there was always a lot of joking and laughter about who was old enough to sit at the big people's table.

As we approach the holidays, I want to challenge all of you to represent the little people at the big people's table. What do I mean by that? I mean that many little people of divorce and dysfunctional family situations are going to be terribly stressed as we approach the holidays. They are going to need a big people advocate.

Holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas are not exciting or happy days for some children of divorce. Right after Halloween, they start thinking about where they will spend what day. They also hear their parents talking and maybe even arguing about when each one will have the children on what day.

Routines get changed and messed up, and this causes undue stress on the kids. Routines create a sense of security for many children. They count on particular things happening at certain times. The kids of divorce may have gotten used to the every-other-weekend or the every-other-week routine, and then along come the holidays, and everything changes. All of a sudden, the child comes upon this day called Thanksgiving. On that day the child has to celebrate with both parents, and it's not even a weekend day.

Thanksgiving Day schedule

Let's take these days called "Thanksgiving" and "Christmas" and see what a typical holiday schedule might look like for these kids.

The child wakes up at Mom's. It's her week, and the child expects to stay at Mom's until Friday night when the switching hour comes, and he goes over to Dad's.

On this particular morning, Mom whisks the child off to her mother's house where all the cousins begin arriving. Everyone is excited about the big meal.

After the meal, all the cousins get involved in games and play together.

All of a sudden, in the middle of playing with the cousins, the kid gets packed up and taken to Dad's home.

Dad takes the child to his mom's house, where the child has to enter another social scene with cousins, but these cousins have already been together all morning.

The child has to navigate the structure of this scenario, which is not easy for some children of divorce. The may hold back, embarrassed that they don't know what is going on.

The child eats another large meal.

Just about the time the child begins to feel comfortable and accepted—whoops, he is whisked off to another house. This is the house of Dad's girlfriend's parents.

It is not unusual for some kids to eat three or even four large meal on a holiday. It becomes a not-so fun day for the child.

What can you do?

Encourage single parents to start preparing now for the holidays.

Help parents keep stress to a minimum.

Don't require single parents to host or volunteer for events. If they do volunteer, remember to provide childcare for the little ones. Keep in mind they have no one at home to leave the children with.

Text single parents Scriptures that provide hope, encouragement, and calmness.

If your church has a Facebook page, include Scriptures that bring stillness and quietness in this hectic season.

Hand out a December calendar with all the church-wide events listed on it. Include any special instructions, such as "bring cookies for the choir event." Give single parents permission to not bring anything or to bring store-bought cookies; don't guilt them into thinking they must bake cookies at home.

Encourage single parents to plan ahead for parties and events, and add them to the calendar you have provided.

Encourage the child to also put the days at each parent's house on the calendar. You could even add a note to the calendar that says something like, "Be sure to write on each day which parent you will be with." You might even provide a special Christmas pen or pencil for the child to record these days.

Set up special days for single parents and their children. One church has a Christmas Creation Saturday. On that day, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., single parents can drop off their children at the family life center. They spend the day making Christmas decorations, baking cookies, making Christmas presents, and cards for both parents. The parents can Christmas shop or go home for a well-deserved nap.

Tell Sunday school and Bible studies teachers to always have enough supplies on hand for any child who wants to make two projects—one for each parent.

Encourage newly divorced single parents to find a Surviving The Holidays group near you. Your church might provide a nursery or childcare for parents attending Surviving the Holidays at a church near you.

Make a conscious effort to invite children in single-parent homes to your Christmas events. You may think that because you put a note in the bulletin, everyone knows they are invited. Children who come to church without a parent, though, don't know.

Won't you be big people advocate and help the little people this holiday season?

Please share what your church is doing to help children living in single-parent homes this holiday season.

This article is updated and adapted from an article originally published on the Kids & Divorce blog on December 28, 2015.

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