

BEYOND THE BOOGEY MAN

HOW TO HELP YOUR KIDS COPE WITH FEAR BY LEANNE BENFIELD



As a little girl, I was afraid to find out what was lurking up the green-carpeted stairs that stretched forever into the darkness. Every night at bedtime, I'd ask one of my parents to go with me up the stairs. When we reached my room and turned on the light, I sighed with relief. After a kiss good night, I'd settle into bed, knowing I was safe.

Now I'm the parent tucking a little girl into bed at night. But her fears are far more complicated than mine were. She experiences fears directly related to being in a single-parent family. As parents, we cannot control what our children fear, but we can help them cope with their anxieties. Following are some common fears your child may experience:

FEAR OF REJECTION:

"Will my parents stop loving me?"

Children of divorce fear that their parents, who apparently stopped loving each other, will also stop loving them. Reassuring our kids does help.

I often say to my daughter, "I love you, and I always will, no matter what happens, no matter what you do. You will always be my girl." I don't want to take for granted that she knows I love her.

FEAR OF RESPONSIBILITY:

"Is the divorce my fault?"

Since kids don't understand divorce, we need to reassure them as often as possible that the divorce wasn't their fault.

"Nearly all children will feel guilty. 'It must be my fault!' is a cry common to almost every child ... particularly those under 11," say Jill Worth and Christine Tufnell, authors of *All Alone? Help and Hope for Single Parents*. "Parents must make it absolutely clear to their children that whatever they did or didn't do would have made no difference. These assurances of their innocence in what happened must be repeated again and again."

FEAR OF CHANGE:

"What's going to happen next?"

Common questions children of single-parent families might worry about are: *Where am I going to live? Will I have to change schools and lose my friends? Will we have enough money? Is Mom or Dad going to marry someone else?* They wonder if they can count on anything.

"Kids need to process, grieve, then take baby steps," says Gary Sprague, president of the Center for Single-Parent Family Ministry. "Take the time to help them make adjustments." Communicate openly with them. Sit down with them

and explain what's happening. Then take gradual steps as things begin to change.

David Sibley, executive director of Confident Kids, agrees that parents need to move slowly, because changing routines can be very stressful for kids. "If you've established traditions, try to maintain what you've always had. Keep things the same as much as possible." And if you need to make changes, give the kids some options. Ask them what they'd like to do.

FEAR OF HARM:

"Will I be safe, secure, and protected?"

Your kids may feel their safety and security are threatened. Again, reassurance is the key to calming their fears. Give them hope in Christ and comfort from God's Word.

In addition, we need to listen to their concerns and acknowledge their fears as real. If we minimize their fears, our kids will feel as though they haven't been heard. As a result, they might make their fears bigger to get attention.

We also need to remember not to make promises we can't keep. "Avoid false hope. Some things we can't promise

because they're beyond our control. When [promises] get broken, it's a tragedy," says Sprague. It could even drive a wedge between them and God.

FEAR OF ABANDONMENT:

"One parent left me. Will the other leave too?"

"This is one of the top fears that all kids have: the physical loss of a parent," says Sprague. For kids in single-parent families, that fear is compounded. They're afraid they'll be left alone.

When Sandy Ciolino's husband died, he left her with two young boys to raise. She told them she would never go away on purpose. She also made every effort to be there whenever they needed her.

In addition, Ciolino gave the boys the phone numbers of family members and friends in case they couldn't reach her. Even now as teenagers, they still carry those phone numbers with them.

"Single parents have to face the fact that anything could happen. We are not guaranteed tomorrow," Ciolino says. By preparing our kids ahead of time, we can lessen their fears about the future.

Chuck Papandrea, a single father of a 7-year-old, talked to his son about an upcoming surgery "in small increments and well in advance, trying not to make it too big of a deal. I let him know there was a very small possibility that I could die in the process. I made it a point to talk about my faith in God. We talked about how He was in control."

Because our kids may worry a lot that something could happen to us, it's also extremely important to arrive on time when meeting or picking up your children. Plan ahead and allow yourself more travel time than necessary.

Another way to comfort kids is to teach them Scripture such as Hebrews 13:5b-6: "I will never leave you or forsake you." Therefore, we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Regardless of what their fears are or how old they are, our kids need us to walk up those dark stairs with them. They need us to turn on the lights and tuck them in with words of reassurance. And as we do so, we can pray for wisdom to help them cope.

resources

The Center for Single-Parent Family Ministry (www.spfm.org)

Provides activities such as single-parent family conferences, encourages leaders to build awareness in the church of the need for single-parent family ministry, trains leaders for effective ministry with single-parent families, and provides trainers to consult with churches.

Sprague also runs a program called Kids Hope, which ministers to kids and is now part of the Center for Single-Parent Family Ministry.

At the Web site, you'll find articles, books, and conference information.

Confident Kids (www.confidentkids.com)

Teaches children skills necessary to understand, talk about, and cope with their life circumstances in healthy and



positive ways. It also encourages children to talk about their experiences, builds self-esteem and a sense of trust

through relationships with caring adults, influences the home environment, guides children and parents into a relationship with God, and teaches them to use prayer and Scripture in dealing with their life circumstances. The Web site includes a resource catalog, articles and book reviews, and a state-by-state listing of helpful contacts.

Single-Parent Family: A Web Site of Focus on the Family

(www.single-parent.family.org)

Offers a wide variety of articles on spiritual growth, how-to and inspirational topics, parenting features, and financial pieces for the single parent. The Web site also features resources, such as books, that are helpful for single-parent families.