

## Helping the Long Distant Parent Stay Connected

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*This article will help church leaders assist the divorced parents in their churches that are separated from their children by long distances. It gives ministers and children's leaders tips to pass onto the parents so that parents can further their relationship with their children.*

When a parent lives out of state and not close to their children, it can be a real challenge to keep the relationship alive. However, there are several things one can do in a situation like this. The first thing many people think of is the telephone. However, after a couple of calls many elementary age children become bored or disillusioned with the idea of a phone call. After the "Hi, how you doing" most kids won't have too much to say. Kids are busy and active and for the most part they don't want to be tied to a phone conversation. If the parent calls during cartoon time, or play time it will seem like the child is too busy to talk on the phone. And they usually are too busy!

If the parent the child lives with is cooperative, then they can prompt some discussion ideas during the week. I would suggest perhaps some paper be kept on the refrigerator that has the label at the top of the page, "Things to tell my dad/mom". As the week progresses, the child can scribble short notes of things to tell the other parent. The parent that lives with the child can also make short notes about things the child can tell the other parent. When the parent calls, pull the list off the fridge and have at it.

The main thing is to encourage the out of state parent to stay connected. Single dads usually ask yes or no questions. Encourage them to stay away from yes or no questions. These types of questions do not stimulate conversation. Also tell them to stay away from question with a one word answer such as, "How was school today?" The kid will probably say, "Fine!" and that's the end of that line of conversation. Instead find out what the subjects are and ask specific questions such as, "So Monday's are the day you get your new spelling words. How many words do you have this week? What are the hardest words for you to spell? How about if I call you on Thursday night and ask you to spell different words? That way I can help you with your spelling test on Friday. Now you have to promise not to be looking at the words when I call. And if you want you can give me a spelling test."

Email is an excellent way to stay connected. For some children they will have the freedom to say whatever they want in an email. But for others, they will experience the split loyalty thing. They may think, "If I say such and such is it going to hurt my dad's feelings if he reads it?" (Meaning the parent they live with.) If you can find neutral territory where a child can receive emails that will work better for the child. In my after school program I had a fifth grade boy tell me that his dad wanted to email back and forth but his mom always read his emails and he didn't feel comfortable with that system. With

the child's permission and the mom's permission I contacted the dad and suggested he send the emails to me at the child care. In the subject line he put "For Ryan". I promised Ryan I would not open those emails. This worked out great for all involved.

Some schools might cooperate with the out of state parent and allow emails to take place at school. Child care or an after school program is another avenue to explore. Tell the parent and child to get creative.

When the child visits the out of state parent, tell the parent to take a lot of pictures. During the next several months the out of state parent can email a picture every so often. One day in the middle of a very cold Oklahoma day Ryan got an email with a picture attached. We printed out the picture. It was of Ryan in the swimming pool on a very hot day the past summer at dad's. That kid was so proud of that picture. He took it around to every person telling him or her about how much fun and his dad had that day. It was a great reminder of a good time with dad. Right before time for his mom to pick him up, Ryan asked if he could call his dad from the center and talk about the picture. It was one of the most joyful phone calls I have heard. Funny thing though, when his mom arrived to pick him up, he didn't show the picture to her. We figured it was a dad and son kind of thing.

Tell the out of state dad to send cards for every occasion. There are calendars you can purchase that celebrate every type of day one can imagine. Tell the out of state parent to find one of those calendars and then purchase cards to celebrate those days or make a card to send to the child. These are gentle reminders that the other parent cares enough to make an effort to contact them.

Email helpful articles about single parenting to the out of state parent or explain how the parent can go online at [DC4K.org](http://DC4K.org) and read the various ParentPages. These short articles help parents whose children are attending a DC4K group to build family strengths in their families. However, the tips will assist any single parent or blending family to deepen their relationships with one another. Encourage the long distant parent to use the topics in the ParentPages to stimulate conversations with the child. If the subject is anger then the parent can ask about when the child was angry this week. Or the parent can share about a time he or she was angry this week.

Parents can send movie dvds and schedule a time to talk about the dvd later. Exchange songs with the child. Tell the out of state parent not to be afraid to share his life with the child. It shouldn't be a one-way conversation about what the child is doing. Relationships become strong by each person contributing the relationship and the conversation. Children want to know what the other parent is doing. If the parent heard a joke or heard a new song or found a passage in the Bible that was meaningful then share those things.

In church classes, have enough extra pieces of different projects so a child can make something for the out of state parent as well as the parent they live with. You might even get the out of state parent's address and mail the items from the church. Always get the permission of the in state parent before you venture into this territory.

Encourage the out of state parent to remember every holiday and send a small gift. This includes Valentine's Day, Easter, and Thanksgiving, 4th of July and of course Christmas. It doesn't have to be much, but something that says, "Hey kid I'm thinking about you." And tell them to NEVER EVER forget a birthday!!!!

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