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New Hope for Parents Without Partners



By EDWARD R. SAMMIS

Single parents are helping one another face those crushing questions:
"Why don't I have a mother?" "Why don't I see Daddy any more?"

"MY HUSBAND and I are divorced, and our six-year-old son doesn't see his father any more. Recently, he has begun telling his playmates that his daddy is dead. This is too much. What should I do?"

The anxious mother's question—unsigned to guard her privacy—was passed forward to the speaker's platform during a meeting of Parents Without Partners, an organization dedicated to helping mothers who have lost their husbands and fathers who have lost their wives.

The answer to her query came from a child-guidance counselor who was the group's guest speaker that evening. He explained that every effort should be exerted to make the father realize the serious emotional plight of his son. But if this failed, a "father substitute" should be found among family friends—some man whom the boy could look up to as a model in things masculine.

Until recently, this mother and others like her were pretty much on their own in meeting the problems of rearing children with only one parent in the house.

But today, the Parents Without Partners organization is giving such people help, both through professional counseling and through the friendly exchange of viewpoints with others in the same plight.

Since the organization was founded five years ago in New York, it has grown to include chapters across the country. In addition, a number of independent local organizations have modeled themselves after it.

There is room for all of these groups, for the extent of the problem is tremendous. Four million married persons in the U.S. are living apart from their spouses, according to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and nearly 6,500,000 children live with only one parent because of death, divorce, separation, or desertion.

But statistics only hint at the enormity of the problem. They cannot reflect the sense of loneliness and isolation, of frustration and helplessness, the suppressed feelings of guilt and anger felt by parents who are trying to rear children without the help of a partner.

When these troubled people gather at Parents Without Partners meetings, there is a flood of questions.

How can I keep my fatherless (or motherless) children

from feeling they are inferior to their playmates?

How can I deal with the tensions that arise when my children visit my divorced spouse?

What about dates? I have chances to go out, but I don't accept because I'm afraid it might upset the children. How can I explain to them my own social needs?

Members of Parents Without Partners get helpful answers to these and thousands of other questions. Each problem is considered individually, but these five points of general advice have proved fruitful:

1. Try to get rid of the hostile feelings resulting from the breakup of your marriage. Such feelings can only harm the emotional life of both you and your children.

2. If you are a "part-time father," you must realize that the emotional security of your children depends on your active participation in rearing them even after the divorce or separation. Financial support isn't enough; love, affection, and moral leadership are necessities.

3. Recognize that possessiveness toward your children may develop as an attempt to compensate for the loss of your mate. Fight against it, so that your child's growth toward independence will not be impaired.

4. Try to overcome the feeling of being "cut off." Cultivate outside interests and hobbies. The single parent's emotional life is reflected in that of his (or her) children.

5. Keep your child from feeling that his predicament is strange. See that he gets to know other children who are being reared by single parents.

Such suggestions fall on fertile ground because a new attitude is developing toward the broken home. There is a growing tendency to pick up the pieces and try to "get on" with normal living.

To help single parents help themselves, the Parents Without Partners organization has expanded to include national workshops and a monthly journal.

And the mail grows steadily heavier at the organization's headquarters—80 Fifth Ave, New York, N.Y.—as more and more single parents discover that there is a group dedicated to helping them with their problems.

"The plight of the single parent seems to arise from the highly organized state of our society," says Mrs. Ela Hathaway, one of the pioneers in the movement. "Therefore, the best way to meet it seems to be as other similar problems have been met—by organization."