Bob: As a single mom raising a son, Linda Ranson Jacobs was wishing for, praying for the influence of a man in her son’s life. God answered her prayer.

Linda: After church this guy came up and goes, “Is Brian going to be coming to the Father/Son fishing trip?” And I said, “Well I guess you didn’t know his father’s gone.” He goes, “Oh I know that. I guess you don’t know that I have daughters only and I need a son that weekend.” “So will you call Brian tonight and ask him?”

So he called Brian and Brian goes, “Well, I don’t know. I don’t have a tent.” “Oh, you do?” “Well, I don’t have any fishing gear, my dad took it all.” “Oh, you have some? Well, I guess I can go.”

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, July 22nd. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. There is hope for children who are growing up without a mom or dad in the home regularly. We’ll hear from Ron Deal and Linda Ranson Jacobs about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us.

I’ve often thought back to the fact that my dad who served in World War II probably experienced what is diagnosed today as PTSD. Back then I don’t what term they used but they didn’t have a diagnosis for it. We think of PTSD as something that people in the military experience, or something that if you’re in police or fire rescue, you may experience PTSD.

I’m thinking about children who are in a family where mom and dad have gotten a divorce. There’s a trauma for the parents who go through a divorce. But those kids have got to experience at some level some kind of traumatic stress. Your parents went through a divorce. How old were you?

Dave: I was six years old.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: Again, there was no diagnosis back then, but it was traumatic.
Ann: Well it’s interesting. Dave has very little recall from his childhood, which makes me wonder “Is it because of the trauma?”

Bob: Right.

Dave: But I do remember going to church with my mom and dad, my little brother. He was five or four and a half. We got baptized by mom and dad at that church that night, came home, walked in our house—it’s vivid; I can remember this. Walked in the house, Christmas presents everywhere—the entire family room/tree. They were everywhere—like triple what would be normal.

We were allowed to rip them open right there and I remember there’s love in this moment. One of the greatest nights in my life, right? Go to church with your family, get baptized, Christmas galore and waking up the next morning and finding out why all that happened last night. Dad left. Christmas Day, he’s gone.

I remember asking my mom—I’m just a little boy—”Where’s dad?” She’s like “Well, he’s gone.” I didn’t know that was permanently, but it was. That’s why there were so many gifts. It was sort of his last hurrah. So you talk about trauma, I stepped right into it and that was decades.

Bob: And you think maybe you blocked out memories from your childhood?

Dave: Oh, I had to. Ann and I have talked about it. I’ve tried to dig them up sometimes and they’re not there.

Ann: His siblings have filled in a lot of those gaps. But it was very traumatic.

Bob: There’s an organization that I’ve been aware of for years called DivorceCare. A lot of churches will use the DivorceCare material as a way to minister to men and women who have gone through a divorce and are recovering from the effect of a divorce. But there’s also a program they’ve put together for kids called DivorceCare for Kids.

Recently, our friend, Ron Deal, sat down and talked with Linda Jacobs who has put that material together—the DivorceCare for Kids material—and actually their conversation is a part of Ron’s new podcast which is called FamilyLife Blended®. This is Episode 7 and it’s now available for listeners who would like to listen to this entire conversation between Ron and Linda on the subject of caring for kids who experienced the trauma of divorce. Ron’s podcast is available for subscription. You can find more when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com.

But we thought today it would be good for listeners to hear Linda’s thoughts about the challenges, the trauma, the stress that kids are facing when there’s been a divorce in
the family and how parents and friends can tune into that and help kids through the reality of that kind of trauma.

[Podcast]

**Linda:** “You need to study your children. You need to form a relationship with your children.” And they go, “I have a relationship, I’m the mother, I’m the dad.” No, you have a different kind of relationship now because when your other parent was here you supported each other.

So little Johnny wanted to do something, so he asked Dad and his dad said, “Go ask Mom.” He asks Mom. You know, as little kids we were all caught in the middle of that. It’s kind of funny now, but you know then when there’s no other parent in your home, you parent differently. Because you have to fill in all the roles now. We have to form a new relationship with our children.

That means we’ve got to observe our children and very few parents observe their children after a divorce. So we need to observe them, we need to—I say don’t question your child when they came back from the other parent’s but just say something like, “So did you have a good weekend? Here’s what I did.” Just form a conversation, but not to question them, but as you talk things will come out and you’ll find out what they did and how they felt, and what was going on.

**Ron:** Connecting into that means you’re not alone, I’m here with you, and we’re getting through this together.

**Linda:** Right. Exactly.

**Ron:** You used an analogy when you spoke at our Summit on Stepfamily Ministry, you said, “It’s kind of like an iceberg, what you see above the surface, the externals of a child going through parental divorce is one thing, but under the surface is a whole lot more.” You talked about some big emotions there. I remember I took some notes: clingy, dependent, fearful, anxious, regression. Do you mind just talking around a few of those for us?

**Linda:** Sure, I’d be glad to. So we have these children, we have two or three children. If each of them are like an iceberg, and they each have different emotions below the surface that we don’t see or we maybe don’t even know about, and you have them in one room in the house; here we have these big icebergs bumping into each other, so we have a constant war.

But there are a lot of things that are going on under the surface. I say under the skin in a child. So many children are clingy, kids who weren’t even clingy before. At the conference I told about going to the Tulsa State Fair with my eight- and twelve-year-old
kids, and them just attaching themselves. They were just like glued to me. I don’t know if it was the crowds. My son said, “I’m afraid I’m going to lose you and I can’t find you.”

So the issue of safety is huge in these kids, and the issue of security. You can keep telling them, “You’re safe and I’m here for you,” but you have to keep telling them that over and over, year after year.

**Ron:** Then you’ve got to back it up.

**Linda:** You’ve got to back it up.

**Ron:** Because if you say, “I’m here for you,” but then you’re not, when it’s your turn for the weekend or whatever.

**Linda:** Right. So the clinginess that goes on for quite a while with some of the kids. Some kids are dependent. Where they were independent before, now they have to have your help; “Help me brush my teeth. Help me comb my hair.” “You’ve been doing this yourself for years.” “I know, but Mom, I need you to help me brush my hair.”

And then little boys, they want you to help pick out their clothes or whatever. It’s just some phases, I hate to say stages, it’s more like phases that they’re going through and they will come back and forth and maybe in two or three years they might be clingy again for a while.

And of course there’s sadness and there’s anger and just every emotion. One emotion that surprised me was being embarrassed. These children—especially at church—my kids and others I’ve known are embarrassed that their parents are separating or that their parents are divorced.

That’s short term; what’s long term? What do we know about children, divorce, and the long-term impact?

**Linda:** Well we know from a study that Judith Wallerstein, a psychologist in Southern California, did—[she] wrote several books. The last one was, *What About the Kids?* If you want to know anything about children in divorce you need to read that book. But she’s says it takes children—most children, I mean we’re talking typical average, not individual children—most children, ten years to process the grief over the death of the family.

Many people say, “Well they should be over it by now, that was two years ago.” Well, this is the death of their family for goodness sakes. *Nothing is ever* the same again for these kids. In order to say, “Hi Daddy,” I have to say, “Goodbye Mommy. I’ll see you later. Hi Dad.” This is all within seconds this is taking place.
So their lives are forever changed. So then in the long term as they grow, mature, and start dating and getting married they're thinking, "I don't know how to do a marriage because my parent's marriage split up, so what do I know about being in a marriage?" Which is why a lot of adult children today tell us they don't get married, they cohabit.

Ron: They cohabit. They're not sure if it can last and if it can be there for them.

Linda: Right.

Ron: So that impact is very significant. Just the “Hi Dad, Goodbye Mom” is “I'm split.” I've heard some children of divorce talk about feeling split in terms of their identity. Like, you know, I'm half dad, half mom. That's part of who I am. Who I am, and when they're together, I feel whole being in their presence and that's as life should be. But when they're not, like, which part of me is with you, which part of me is over there?

I think if they feel splintered then they don't know even how to adopt our faith. If they feel like they can't quite find who they are, they're always having to figure out who they are in light of who their parents are, then how to do I internalize faith to be something that's mine? My parents both are believers perhaps, but how do I make that me? There are some real challenges in that.

Linda: Oh my goodness, that's so important. After a divorce, you might have a child that goes to this denomination for two weeks and then this denomination for two weeks and the kid goes, “See I'm going over here, do I kneel? Do I raise my hands when I sing? Do I wear shorts, or do I have to wear long pants over here? Do I have to—trying to keep these religions straight, trying to keep the homes straight. There's a lot of pressure on little kids.

Ron: You know, it seems to me that kids are constantly monitoring their parents after a divorce. What's going on with Dad? How's he feeling? How's he feeling about me? How's he feeling about Mom? Is he okay? Is he falling apart? Is he depressed? Is he functioning well? Do I not have to worry about Dad, or do I have to worry about Dad?

Mom—Do I have to worry about Mom? Do I not have to worry about Mom? How's she feeling about me? How's she feeling about Dad? How's she feeling about—They are constantly monitoring the emotional climate of their parents’ world.

I think that moves children to a natural place of caretaking for their parents, yes?

Linda: Yes, it does and that's—it's supposed to be the other way around. The parents are supposed to be taking care of the children.

Ron: Right.
Linda: But the children are becoming ‘adultized’ you might say, or something like that. So now they’re having to be the caretaker.

Ron: It seems to me in that situation that you’ve got to take care of you so that your kids don’t have to take care of you. How do they do that? How do they care for themselves so that they don’t inadvertently put that off on their child?

Linda: So whether you go through DivorceCare or something else, I think every parent should go through some type of group support program, so they have a place to talk about what’s going on in their lives.

I tell people going through divorce, single parent, or even widowed, you find one or two people to talk to and that’s all you talk to. The whole world doesn’t need to know all about your personal life.

The other thing is the more you talk about it, many times it becomes that loop in your brain and you say, “he did this and then he did this” and it gets worse and worse and worse. Then you kind of exaggerate the story a little bit and you’re looping and looping through, which a lot of it is not really true. It’s just what you’re assuming to be true.

So if you find somebody to talk to, or if you go to DivorceCare or you go to a church program or some type of group support, that’s the place that you learn to take care of yourself. When you take care of yourself, then you can begin to take care of your child.

Ron: Elizabeth Marquardt, she in her book, Between Two Worlds, talks about how she learned in her survey of kids that have been through a parental divorce, is that—I think it was less than one third of them ever had anybody from their church reach out to them.

If we’re trying to help adults, single parents or maybe in a blended family but you went through a divorce, if we’re trying to help them be okay so that they can care for their kids, the church needs to be involved in that.

Linda: Absolutely.

Ron: Then we can be in a continuing arm of care for the children. But if we don’t ever make contact, we’ve got nothing to offer.

Linda: That’s right. I had been divorced I think at least two years and a lady from my church called and she said, “I want to bring you dinner tonight.” I was like, “Whyyy?”

[Laughter]

She said, “Well, you know you’re divorced and I never did anything for you, and if your husband had died I’d have been everywhere and done everything for you, but the Lord
just laid it on my heart this morning that I need to bring you dinner tonight.” I was like, “Well okay, I guess.”

So we drive up to our house, we were driving up to the house and my son goes, “Why is Mrs. Harmon’s car here?” I said, “She’s bringing us dinner tonight.” And he goes, “Whyyyy?”

Ron: [Laughs] The same thing you said.

Linda: “Well because when your dad left, she felt bad that she never helped us out.” And he goes, “Well isn’t that nice!”

Ron: The message there of course is, “We love you. We care for you. God loves you and cares for you.” We represent the Gospel when we put hands and feet to it, so that’s something everybody can do. My guess is she was not on staff.

Linda: No.

Ron: She wasn’t being paid to go and take you a meal, right? Everybody can do that.

Linda: I have another short little story about my son. We were in this church and they said, “Well, now next Sunday is the Father/Son fishing trip.” Or next weekend. We had just joined that church. My heart just fell. Brian wasn’t there, he was with his dad and I was like, “Oh no, how am I going to address this?”

So after church this guy came up and goes, “Is Brian going to be coming to the Father/Son fishing trip?” And I said, “Well, I guess you didn’t know his father’s gone.” He goes, “Oh I know that. I guess you don’t know that I have daughters only and I need a son that weekend.” “So will you call Brian tonight and ask him?”

So he called Brian and Brian goes, “Well, I don’t know. I don’t have a tent.” “Oh you do?” “Well, I don’t have any fishing gear, my dad took it all.” “Oh, you have some? Well, I guess I can go.”

So I took him up on Friday night and he’s real apprehensive. I’m driving away and he’s standing off to the side and I’m going, “God, am I doing the right thing, just putting him out here? Please let somebody see him.”

So we go all Friday night and Saturday, and Saturday night comes, and I hear a car in the driveway, and then I hear this door open and he comes running in and he goes, “Mom, Mom! I had such a good time. You just won’t believe it, I got to fish all night long and I got to camp. And you know what? They invited me to sit around the campfire and they gave me coffee to drink.”

[Laughter]
I’m a Mom that doesn’t drink coffee. That was a big deal to him. That one weekend did so much for him in being accepted into that church and it was just a simple fishing trip was all it was, but it was huge for him.

**Ron:** Yes, that is awesome. Okay let’s fast forward a little bit. Because now we’re thinking kids, divorce, long term, somebody—Mom/Dad—is getting married—forming a blended family. Does anything with the new family and the adjustments related to that intersect with the past experience of divorce?

**Linda:** Absolutely, because a child still has the death of their family. They’re still hurting. Remember ten years to process the divorce, process the death of the family. So maybe you’ve been divorced five years and you’re healing and you’re doing well, and you’ve dated somebody for quite a while and now you’re ready to get married. But the child is still suffering.

**Ron:** There’s still stuff going on under the surface.

**Linda:** Right, like that iceberg.

**Ron:** And we know loss reminds you of loss. So wow, Mom's just not home as much anymore; she goes out on these dates. She seems to be texting this guy and kind of engaged with who this person is, and I can’t always get her attention like I used to. So that’s a little loss moment that reminds us—it reminds a child of loss in the past.

That taps into the fear, “Oh no. Is this another hurricane? Is this what we’ve got going on? How’s this going to impact me? How’s this going to impact me? I don’t—I know it’s my mom and me and we get along great, but is that now changing?” So it’s important for people to remember that those things will intersect in a child’s heart.

 Doesn’t mean—I’m always quick to say this—it doesn’t mean you should stop dating or you should never get married or if you’re already married that you should not have gotten married. Doesn’t mean any of that. But it does mean that your experience of moving forward might not be experienced the same by your child.

So what kind of advice, what kind of words would you offer to somebody who is perhaps in the dating phase or maybe already married, just in terms of connecting into that experience in their kid?

**Linda:** I think we always have to be truthful with children, truthful on their developmental level. So if we’re starting to date, we just need to say, “I have a special new friend that I like. I’m not ready to introduce you yet, but one of these days I’m going to introduce you to my new friend.” And you go slow. You go through holidays and birthdays. You go through a year of doing different things together. You know what, children know, they know what’s going on.
I had a Dad one time, he goes, “I want you to talk to my second-grade son.” The son lived with the Dad, didn’t see the Mom much. “There’s something going on with him.” I said, “Are you dating?” He goes, “Yeah, but my son doesn’t know.” I said, “Are you kidding? I knew when you walked in the door you were dating. You’re like a seventeen-year-old.” He said, “No, he doesn’t know at all.”

He brings the son in and I said, “So what’s going on in your life?” and he goes, “Well my dad’s dating. He doesn’t want me to know that he’s dating, but I know he’s dating.” I said, “Well do you know who he’s dating?” He said, “Yeah, I do know who he’s dating.” I was like, “Well, who’s he dating?”

I didn’t know who he was dating but the kid knew. Kid knew all about this relationship. “So what makes you think your dad is dating?” “Oh man, he’s just so happy, he’s laughing all the time and whenever I’m not there he thinks I don’t see him calling or texting on his phone.”

The kids know. They always know. So we have to be truthful with them.

[Studio]

**Bob:** Well, again, we’ve been listening to a portion of an interview Ron Deal did with Linda Ranson Jacobs for his podcast, FamilyLife Blended. This is Episode 7 and if you’d like to hear the entire conversation or subscribe to the podcast/download additional episodes, go to FamilyLifeToday.com.

That principle there at the end about parents needing to be honest with their kids and not try to mask or hide but figure out how to wisely, appropriately bring kids in to the reality of what you’re dealing with as a parent. Whether it’s issues your processing from your divorce or whether it’s new relationships like they were talking about there, you’ve got to figure how to do that as a stepparent because if you think you’re keeping it from your kids, you’re just fooling yourself.

**Ann:** Kids are so smart, aren’t they? They see everything. They’re wondering about so much, but they know way more than we realize.

**Dave:** I can remember I was that kid. My mom was dating after the divorce. We moved to another state and I remember I was probably seven. So it was a year—maybe seven and a half—a year later. My mom comes home from a date with a guy who had like five or six daughters.

**Ann:** Wait, did you know it was a date?

**Dave:** Yes, I knew. I was seven years old. I didn’t know what a date meant but I knew she went out with a guy and this could possibly be my new dad. I was old enough to understand that and thankfully for me, my mom was honest, and I watched her over the
years date different gentlemen—never did remarry but you know, it’s the reality of the situation. Your kids do know.

**Bob:** DivorceCare for Kids is a great program to help parents know “How do I help my kids?”

**Dave:** Oh, I wish we would have had it.

**Ann:** I would encourage every parent listening to find this program if it’s not at their own church. Just because I have friends that have gone through divorce and they’re in such pain that sometimes they can’t really meet the needs of their kids and don’t know how to meet the needs of their kids at that moment. This program has walked through it with people and they can help.

**Bob:** You can go online at FamilyLifeToday.com to get more information about DivorceCare for Kids. We’ve got a link on our website that will give you the information.

Linda has also just completed a book called *The Single Parent: Confident and Successful*, and it’s a book we’ve got in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. You may know a single parent you’d like to give them this book as a gift.

Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com to order it from us. Or call 1-800-FL-TODAY. The title of the book again, *The Single Parent* by Linda Ranson Jacobs. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com or call 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word “TODAY.”

By the way, we’ve got an event coming up this fall in Chesapeake, Virginia—October 24th and 25th. It’s our 2019 *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*. This event is for anyone, maybe on a church staff, maybe you work with a nonprofit organization, or maybe you just have a heart to work with stepfamilies/blended families in your church and in your community. This is an equipping event for you.

The theme this year is “Stepfamilies in Crisis.” There’s information about this upcoming event on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com. Again, it’s the 2019 *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*. If you want to find out more, go to FamilyLifeToday.com.

We’ve got a lot of couples who have decided to strengthen their marriage this summer. They’re using the FamilyLife “Stronger Forever” workout plan that we developed. You can go to FamilyLifeToday.com and download the workout plan. We’ve got exercises to improve your strength, or your cardio, or both. Just activities you can do in your marriage this summer to help build a stronger marriage relationship. It’s all free and here’s the kicker: one couple that downloads this “Stronger Forever” plan is going to be our guest, all expenses paid, on a trip on the 2020 *Love Like You Mean It* marriage cruise.
We’ll cover the airfare for both of you, night in the hotel before the cruise sets sail, and then your round-trip passage onboard the 2020 Love Like You Mean It marriage cruise. There is no purchase necessary to enter the contest—began back on July 1, 2019. It ends on August 30, 2019. Official rules can be found at FamilyLife.com/StrongerForever. We hope you will build a stronger marriage relationship this summer and look forward to seeing one couple from the group joining us on the Love Like You Mean It marriage cruise in 2020.

And we hope you can join us back again tomorrow. We’re going to talk about cows and chicken and biscuits and waffle fries and probably some lemonade as well. Steve Robinson joins us tomorrow. He spent more than three decades working at Chick-fil-A®. We’re going to talk about what is arguably everybody’s favorite place to go for lunch or dinner, right? I mean we all love Chick-fil-A. I hope you can join us back tomorrow for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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