

When You are both Mom and Dad

Kaye Terry Hanson

This address was given, April 1-2, 2004 at the BYU Family Expo Conference

© 2004 by Brigham Young University,
Division of Continuing Education
All rights reserved.

For further information write:

BYU Family Expo,
136 Harman Continuing Education Building,
Provo, Utah 84602.
(801) 422-3559
E-mail: conferences@byu.edu
Home page: <http://familyexpo.byu.edu>

To avoid the appearance of some pop magazine “50-minute cure-all” for the ailment of the day, allow me to begin here. I know that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true. I know we are led by prophets ancient and modern, including Gordon B. Hinckley and Joseph Smith. I know the plan of salvation allows for each one of us to choose to return to live with our Father in Heaven again. I know that choosing is the key to who we are and where we are going.

There is also much that I don't know, so many things I try and try again, so much I have to learn. But we have no time here for my inadequacies. Instead, let's focus on a number of things from life's experiences that have helped lift and sustain a family when someone has to be both mom and dad. Much will apply to the death of a spouse as well as to divorce.

I raised two children alone. They are both grown now, with children of their own. I was divorced when they were still in elementary school, but I became a single parent much earlier, even while my husband was still living in our home. After agonizing decisions and many months of trying to find what the right thing to do was, we were divorced. Fault is not the issue here, family is. I earnestly pray that this information will never be needed by you. But in this world I know you will have friends, ward members, and family members whom you may help because something in this laundry list will ring a bell. Let's look at three major ways:

- Regarding the Church and the gospel
- Regarding the children
- Regarding yourself

First, as you—or someone you love—find yourself having to be both mom and dad, consider these ideas in relationship to the Church and the gospel.

1. Choose to be completely active in the Church.

Be there—it's where you belong. Sit closer to the front than you usually do. Arrive early enough so you can greet people as you go to your seats. Sing the hymns. No matter your children's ages or how many of them you have, spread them out on either side of you and claim your space. Make a way to touch them, hug them, hold their hands so they recognize that Church as a safe, comfortable, happy place to be. On the way in and out, assign yourself to speak to and smile at at least ten people. Remember, you belong. For a long time I felt like a stepchild at church. The teachings over the pulpit and in the classrooms seemed to shout that I wasn't in a whole family and that I was an outsider, a misfit, a square peg. A friend told me she learned to "fake it" at church. She reminded herself that her absent husband had always served in bishoprics and stake presidencies, and she had always had to sit alone anyway. So she decided this was no different and she could do this, too. After a time she became more comfortable there.

2. Take advantage of the programs of the Church.

Have your Primary children at Primary activities and your Mutual-age children at Mutual activities. Volunteer to drive, to help out, to be where they need to be so you can know their friends and they can know you.

3. Pray for good home teachers.

What a blessing. When I moved into a new ward as a single parent, the home teacher assigned to my little family had been my bishop ten years before in another city. He was perfect for us. In the meantime they had had a boy the very same age as mine. When my home teacher signed his boy up for Little League or for soccer, he signed up mine. Often I didn't even know it was time for that to happen. But he was in the loop, and I learned to let him do it. He was our home teacher for 13 years. His having been our bishop years before carried the added advantage that he knew my former husband. When he came to town to visit the children, our home teacher was comfortable greeting the children's daddy and continuing a respectful relationship with him.

Our home teacher and his wife attended dance recitals and track meets and invited us to dinner. He told us all that we were terrific, and gradually we learned to believe him. Over the years he gave my son a baseball mitt, school blessings, the priesthood, advice about starting a business, and the perfect example of what home teaching is. He gave my daughter tennis lessons, flowers when she won the track meet, her first job, and the perfect example of gentlemanly kindness. He attended their weddings in the temple and exulted over the births of their first children. Long after he has moved from the ward, he has remained a friend and a mentor for us all.

4. Use music, prayer, and scriptures.

Early on, when we were first alone and the children were just five and one, I found the hardest times to be after they were tucked into their beds at night. Then my loneliness became unbearable. I discovered that the classical music station on the radio soothed my troubled soul. I began to understand King Saul and his love for David's music. I stumbled across an old piano book of mine and sat at the piano for hours until I could play Tchaikovsky's "None But the Lonely Heart" without looking. Those minor melodies and dissonant chords expressed the depth of my pain, and I blessed Tchaikovsky's talent as the children were lulled to sleep by my playing.

Prayers became more earnest and more pleading, and the scriptures became lifelines to sustain me through the labyrinth of complexities I faced each day. Both prayers and scriptures brought revelation and comfort and hope.

When the burden seemed to get really heavy and I wondered if I could carry it any longer, more than once I fell to my knees and prayed for relief. Then, rising, the phone would ring, and it would be a ward member asking me to bring a cake to a funeral, or a friend wondering if I could substitute teach in a Primary class, or someone asking me to drive the Cub Scouts on an outing. I came to understand that those were literal answers to my prayers, giving me purpose for just a little longer until I could see more clearly again.

Gradually my experiences brought learning as my prayers changed and my heart tried to understand. I will never know, but I wonder sometimes how long the despair might have lasted if I hadn't had music and prayer and scriptures.

5. Ask for priesthood blessings.

Good men who love the Lord willingly give blessings. I found it so difficult to ask and came to hang on the setting-apart blessing for a calling or a blessing given to one of my children when they were sick, seeking to hear in each one counsel from the Lord for me. What should I be doing? What was I missing that I needed to know? Gradually, I became secure enough from time to time to ask someone for a blessing. Looking back now, I know I could have been braver, could have asked more confidently, but then I did the best I could.

6. Pay tithing.

Even at this time of potential financial challenges . . . *especially* at this time of potential financial challenges, keep your tithing current.

7. Serve.

Serving lets us get outside of ourselves. Serving opens the windows of heaven and teaches principles that may not come any other way. I'm reminded of the terrible first week when my husband was gone. I didn't know where he went or what was happening next. I was the Spiritual Living leader in my ward Relief Society, and the lesson was on the Prophet Joseph Smith. I can remember wondering if my role was to follow my husband away from the Church in order to

keep our family intact. No one in the ward knew he had gone away except the bishop, and I determined that I must teach that lesson. Realize, please, that I had already served a mission, had been married in the temple, finished graduate school, and had borne testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel and the Prophet Joseph Smith thousands of times. Yet I remember that on that day, in the sunny morning room of our ward Relief Society, I was allowed to *know*, to feel all over my body, to recognize with a surety that is beyond question, that the Prophet Joseph Smith had restored the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullness to the earth. I knew it then, I know it now, and I understood clearly that following my husband out of the Church would have been no blessing to our family, nor to him. I remain forever grateful that I was allowed to serve on that day, when my world was crashing down on every side.

Later, I was called to be the Primary president in my new ward. I couldn't believe the courage of the bishop in calling me, certainly not a good role model, to lead the little children. I was so grateful, and I learned so much. I had thought such service would be denied me forever because of my square-peggedness. Then I remembered a wise bishop years before who, when I was serving as Young Women president, had fielded my protests about calling a Laurel teacher who was married to a nonmember. "It's not where she is right now," he said, "but where her heart is. She longs to be married in the temple. She is a good example to the Laurels." And as I came to know her, I fully agreed that she was. Could it be that if my heart was right I could serve in such leadership callings? From this vantage point I say a very loud, "Yes!"

While I was Primary president, an experience I treasure concerning children was given me. It happened just as Primary was moved to Sunday and we had no materials for sharing time for a while. We were encouraged to develop our own ideas of what to teach the children, and on this particular morning it was my turn to teach them about testimony. We had a very large Primary, so first I taught the senior Primary, those eight years old and above, about what testimony is. As I taught, it was revealed to me that several young people in that room already had testimonies that Jesus Christ lives. I remember being grateful, both to know that I was raising my children with wonderful other children, and that I was privileged to receive such a clear message from the Lord. Then the junior Primary came in, all the little ones who were under eight. I adjusted the message for their level of understanding and began again. It was revealed clearly to me that every single child in that room had a sure knowledge that Jesus is the Christ and that He lives. I was overwhelmed with the realization that it wasn't that the older children had developed testimonies already, but that many of them had not yet forgotten what they came to earth knowing. I was stunned, both with the message and the realization that I was allowed to receive it. When we went to sacrament meeting and heard the sacrament prayers I heard, "Remember, remember. . ." in a whole different way.

8. Attend the temple.

Hearing those sacred blessings again and again eventually helped center me and gave me perspective. Sometimes I did initiatories and marveled at each specific blessing. After a long time, I volunteered for sealings and heard those words I had heard at my own temple marriage take on new meaning as I looked from this perspective. I think of temple work as the ultimate service, allowing us to get outside ourselves for the sake of someone else.

9. Look for positives.

Find them everywhere. Find them when you get through a day without crying, when you get the dishes done, when the sun is shining, when the rain is falling because it makes things grow. Develop an attitude of finding the silver linings, because they are truly there. Look for beauty in nature, in friends, in art, in music, in flowers, in blades of grass, in clean laundry, in birds, in ice cream cones, in laughter, in *anything*.

10. Keep a journal.

In a journal you can write frankly. Writing is often therapy and is always useful. You may approach how you feel, or not. You may write about what is happening, or not. Just writing will help—I promise. If you do write what you are feeling, you will find, over time, that you are progressing. Looking back you will discover you are not quite as sad, or as confused, or as desolate as you once were. Here is a place to plead with the Lord, to explore your thinking, to understand your own wrestle. Try it.

Now to the second laundry list that may be helpful when you have to be both mom and dad. This list is regarding the children.

1. Establish a place.

This may mean that you have to move away from the aggravation, or get an unlisted phone number, or downsize. No matter what the requirement, preserve as much of the familiar as possible. Have beds and tables and chairs be familiar to the children and help them see as many of the changes as possible as a grand adventure. Make life as normal as possible. Establish a routine that is familiar: for example, each day we go to school, eat dinner at 6:00, and read scriptures together before we go to bed. We practice the piano, do homework, and play on the soccer team.

The moving away from the aggravation will protect the family from running into people who are painful to meet until fragile parts of family members begin to toughen up with time. The unlisted phone number isn't for escaping from the world, but to keep curious acquaintances from prying questions until you are more ready to handle them.

2. Develop family rituals and family lore.

Keep as many family traditions as you can. Have special dinners, birthday celebrations, and if the absent family member always divvied out the presents from under the Christmas tree, you do it this time, as though it is just the same. Listen to friends' suggestions and find some new traditions that you can make be your very own. That can be as simple as new pajamas on Christmas Eve morning so the Christmas morning pictures look terrific, or calling out goodnight to each other like the Waltons did ("Goodnight, John Boy, goodnight Mary Ellen"). It could be as complex as one family we know who gave each child a different room for an Easter egg hunt

with specially chosen presents hidden away for each one.

3. Realize that each child goes through different stages of understanding at different times.

For example, when my son was six and his sister was two, she would race to her daddy as he drove in the driveway, with her brother just behind her. By the time my son turned 10, he would stand at my side struggling with where his loyalties should be, while his six-year-old sister still flew out the door to welcome her daddy. A few years later, my maturing manly son at 14 could stride out the door to welcome his father while my now 10-year-old daughter would stand by my side, struggling with where her loyalties were. The point is, no matter how far away we got from the initial pain, they each had to process what they were feeling then in an age-appropriate manner. As I grew to understand that, I became better able at encouraging them to be themselves and to reach out across what could have been awkward situations. Eventually we all grew up.

4. Rejoice in the children's magnificence.

Really. I remember the first time my toddler daughter did something absolutely charming as I sat on the bench at church, and I turned from habit to say to the one other person on the earth who could or would smile and enjoy the delight in our darling child—then remembered he wasn't there. Where to share secret smiles over growth, where to talk to someone about these delightful bundles of energy? Any such comments to others sounded like bragging or calling attention to something insignificant, or worse.

After a long time I learned to temper my enthusiasm and share my children's antics with a friend here or a friend there. But, frankly, I have never gotten over the sense of loss at not being able to share fully who they are, what they are learning, how they are developing, and happy statements like, "he does that like you do," or "she sounds just like you."

Another level of magnificence is their necessary maturity in some matters. I remember driving down the freeway with my five-year-old son beside me and his one-year-old sister in her car seat behind us. Out of the blue he said to me. "We will all have new jobs here now." Wondering where he was going with that, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well," he responded, "it will be your job to be in charge of everything. And I will help you. And it will be Gretchen's job to make us laugh." To this day I am astonished with his wisdom. That statement got us through many a hard time. Sometimes, after some messy project we would find the baby in, he would jump to his little sister's defense by telling me, "Remember, Mom, she's just doing her job!" And we would all collapse in laughter remembering his assignments.

5. Learn to bite your tongue.

Don't ever criticize the absent parent, especially in front of the children. I was blessed with a friend who taught me that very early in my pain. She was older, and her aging mother had come to live with her. My friend said her mother, who had been divorced from her father many years

before, complained endlessly about her father's faults. She complained about his drinking, his attitude, his personal habits, his clothing, everything. My friend then said, "Guess who I feel sorry for" and, "guess who I identify with." My friend said it didn't matter how much truth was in her mother's statements; she began, after all those years, to side with her father. That's when I remembered again that the commandment is "Honor thy father *and* thy mother." And I knew that if I did my job right, my children would love their father.

6. Keep a journal.

This journal is for each child. Write down the delightful things they say, talk about your feelings for the child at different ages and different stages. Keep a box of treasures for each one. Tuck in some of their drawings or their notes to you as they grow. One of my favorite keepsakes is a scrawled note from my 12-year-old that he left on my pillow one Sunday with a scrawny tightly closed flower from a weed from the vacant lot he crossed on his walk home from church. The note is even more poignant when I remember that it was a very late spring that year, and there were simply no flowers out to be had. The shred of note on my pillow said to me, "For all you do, this bud's for you."

Keep family photo albums or scrapbooks. I was gratified with the importance of those simple snapshots when each child brought the person they eventually married into the living room where they shared the family albums and all their childhood memories with them. We all laughed and remembered and began to love each other as extended family.

An important time in our lives seemed to cry out for a family picture. My daughter turned 8, my son turned 12, and I completed graduate work the same summer. After a long time of resistance, I finally scheduled a sitting for a family portrait. It is beautiful. We are wearing bright colors and smiling. I stared at that picture a thousand times because what I had expected to see wasn't there. There was no big black hole by me. We three looked like a whole family. In fact, that's when I learned that we three *were* a whole family. Since then we've had several family portraits taken, and I revel in each one. The last one had 10 of us in it, but it isn't the numbers that make us complete.

The third important area to remember when you have to be both mom and dad is regarding yourself.

1. Allow those who *do* still love you to be helpful.

Plenty of people still love you. For me, some of those people were every member of my husband's family. They insisted on inviting me and the children to family events. For a long time that kept things "normal" for us. After time and after a move, some of those relationships retreated to the Christmas card variety, which remains even after all these years. But one of my husband's brothers and his wife insisted that they stay in my life, and they did. The wife called me every day at first, just to be sure I was all right. She proved to be trustworthy, offering help and ever able to keep a confidence. Our children loved to play together, so they invited us sometimes for dinner or for birthdays. My brother-in-law offered blessings to my children and

simply raved over their accomplishments. I came to know that those dear people had hearts so kind and good that they could appreciate my children without feeling any threat to the magnificence of their own. In short, they were Christlike examples of everything a person carrying Christ's name should be. Never at any time did I question their love of their brother, my former husband. What I learned was that they could love us both. Family and friends really don't have to line up behind one of us or the other and take sides. Good people can love us both.

2. Face your fears.

I had grown up being afraid of the dark. When I became the only adult sleeping in the house, I worried about that. My washer and dryer were hooked up in the garage, and I found I didn't dare go out there to change the clothes from the washer to the dryer if it was dark outside. Irrational, I know, but a murder in my small town when I was a child had really frightened me, and I wrestled with that memory still.

Now that I was alone with the children, I realized that I couldn't indulge in that fear anymore. I knew I couldn't risk frightening my children, nor could I face a world where I was afraid after sundown. That would be debilitating, so I took it to the Lord. I remember the conversation from my knees by my bed. I explained how I was afraid, how I needed to be braver, and I pled for Him to take the fear away. And He did.

The fear was gone, simply gone. I didn't even have to think about it anymore. Since that time I have walked many dark streets of this world and not been afraid. I learned not to watch scary TV, ever, and I learned that an animal in the house, a cat or a dog or a bird, is very useful. I can blame all the things that go bump in the night on the animal. I am profoundly grateful that I am no longer afraid.

Another fear was the financial one. During those first weeks of heavy burden, I remember thinking I would need to go to the Alpha Beta supermarket nearby to apply for a job. At that point I had a master's degree, but my self-worth was so far down I could see nothing possible but the most menial of jobs. Eventually, I remembered my mother's pre-college advice to do something I liked in case I ever needed it. Now I needed it. But not knowing how to get a job from where I was, I chose to return to graduate school to open job doors again. For me it has been heaven, opening doors I never could have imagined even when I wasn't under stress.

3. Develop a small and steady support group.

Continue to develop friends who have similar interests. When my friends started a little play group with our three-year-olds, I proved to be the most steady in having the children at my house. I needed them. When my Jewish neighbors asked me how to bottle fruit, I taught them. When they bought a saw and began to build toys for their children, I asked them to help me do the same. When my Catholic neighbors made small plants grow into a jungle of big plants, I quizzed them until they helped me learn. A friend told me that only when she began walking with a few neighbors early each morning did she realize that everybody struggles with something. Though everyone else in the group came from an intact family, they had other

problems. That helped her put her own struggles into perspective.

4. Do something.

Make quilts, paint pictures, bottle fruit, start a business, write a book, do family history, sew Raggedy Ann dolls, build bookshelves, paint rooms, put on plays, go back to school, read biographies, play the violin, practice the piano again, raise rabbits, make candles, plant a garden, learn new computer software, sing in a trio, take bicycle rides, walk every day. Do something. Give yourself purpose at something you like to do or want to learn. Start anywhere. Just start.

5. Read about the effects of divorce.

Learn that men and women do things differently. Realize that others have dealt with hard things, many of them more frightening to you than what you are dealing with. Lots of research exists about divorce and its effects on family, and some of it may be useful to you. I cheered inside when I read something that expressed what I was feeling. Feeling I was understood was important to me. I remember a poem I found with a line in it that resonates still. In the poem a newly divorced woman got out the Christmas ornaments for the first time and ran across a pair of blue jeans that belonged to her former husband. As she held them up and looked at the shape of them, where the knees had bent to the shape of his legs and the wrinkles had set in, she realized, "Some of my dreams, like your jeans, only fit on you." I feel that way, too.

It was in reading that I discovered the five stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Though I read that all losses supposedly go through these phases, I didn't feel that was happening to me. When I realize that it took four years from our first separation to divorce, I can see that I still hoped something would work out. From here that looks very much like the first stage, denial. I can remember thinking that if I were just perfect, my husband would see what he was giving up. From here that looks like bargaining. I remember the weight of my body that first morning when I swept my tiny kitchen floor for several hours as though I was in slow motion. From here that looks like depression. But the stage I really remember was after more than four years and a move; I had a conversation with my kind and gentle bishop in which I seemed to simply snap and become livid. "Can't he see the magnificence of these children?" I raved. "He has made really poor choices," I ranted. "Not only are the children wonderful, I'm not so bad either." My anger lasted a couple of weeks and then was gone. Interestingly enough, it seemed to be a turning point for my moving on. Maybe there is something to these five stages of grief after all.

6. Be generous to and gracious with your former spouse.

There is simply no point in wasting time or energy or thought on bitterness or revenge. Life is too short. Besides, such sentiments carve their deepest scars in you, not in him. Accept the fact that you'll get better at it over time and begin as early as you can.

7. Allow yourself time.

Everything seems to get better over time. Just as our miraculous bodies bear the ability to heal themselves, so do our marvelous minds, if we let them. Be patient with yourself and with the children's emotions. I worried for 13 years about my son's missionary farewell. But when the day came, I was able to walk into the audience before the meeting started and invite my son's father to join us on the stand. It was good for my son. It was good for me.

8. Accept that divorce is never final.

Truly, it never ends. The court may say it does, but the reality is the worlds you and your former spouse inhabit just keep circling into each other again—especially when there are children. One of my friends, in a moment of rather macabre humor, said she would prefer that her husband just died. With divorce it was as though he kept coming alive again.

One surprise to me is that now my grandchildren come with questions. “Why didn't you and grandpa stay married?” “What is divorce?” “Will my mommy and daddy get divorced?” The pain comes again in an entirely different context, and I return to my knees to ask the Lord for right answers to their queries. Divorce is never final.

9. Keep a journal.

The journal keeps cropping up, doesn't it. For me it has been a lifesaver, a blessing, a chance to explore my own thoughts and actions in relationship to all three areas we've talked about today: the Church, the children, and myself. In my journal I can dream, explain, explore, and come back another day and find I was completely off base. It helps my sanity and my testimony. I highly recommend it.

So there we have it. Three laundry lists of ways that have helped me deal with the adversity that comes with living in this telestial world. Much of the list is useful, I think, in dealing with *any* adversity. Because that's why we're here, I believe, to be tested, to be tried. Do I wish it hadn't happened? Oh, yes. But it did, and I have learned many things.

I think of Joseph Smith and the adversities that came with restoring the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I hang onto knowing that “all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). I think of Jacob as he was blessed by his dying father, “. . . thou knowest the greatness of God,” Lehi said, “and he shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain” (2 Nephi 2:2). I think of the Savior Himself, as He stood with us in the council in heaven saying, “. . . We will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25).

We return to where we started. The gospel of Jesus Christ is true. We are led by prophets ancient and modern, including Gordon B. Hinckley and Joseph Smith. The plan of salvation allows for each one of us to choose to return to live with our Father in Heaven again. Choosing is the key to who we are and where we are going. I want to live with Him again. In the name of Jesus Christ,

Amen.