

purpose that seem to arise from accepting *aliyah* as a major goal. It is unquestionable that such a reversal in roles and revolution in approach will substantially increase the number of Americans going on *aliyah*, and being absorbed more successfully. While this will

have a great positive impact on Israel, it will make hardly a numerical dent on the American Jewish community or on the Center membership. Can we escape such a challenge? Do we have the courage to ignore it?

## **The Jewish Community Center: A Group for Adolescents from One-Parent Families\***

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*One of the major foci of this...group has been to help these adolescents who have experienced the death or divorce of parents verbalize their feelings and work on the process of mourning. It is important to note that this mourning does not only occur with recent loss but often remains buried and festers over many years.*

In recent years much has been discussed and published about the enormous increase in one-parent families. In New York State the number of children under eighteen living with only one of their parents has almost doubled since 1948. The Jewish family unit has also undergone similar patterns of change as evidenced by statistics on current membership coming out of the various Jewish community centers. On the average, "single-parent families are making up from 10 per cent to 25 per cent of total Center membership, and in some cases these figures may even be higher."<sup>1</sup> At the Samuel Field YM-YWHA we are currently reporting about 20 per cent of our teen membership as coming from one-parent families.

The "one-parent family" that is the subject of this article refers to the products of family breakup caused by parental separation, divorce, or death. Coincident with the increase in the number of such families has been a proliferation of special studies, books, articles and discussions trying better to understand this situation. Television, which for so many years perpetuated the myth of the universality of the two-parent American family in such

shows as "Father Knows Best", has now spotted this trend in family life. Several situation comedy series such as "Joe" or "The Courtship of Eddie's Father" tried to romanticize and make it "in" and fulfilled to be living in such a family. In real life it is not such fun and is far less exciting.

Professionally, we are all well aware of the major impact that parental breakup has on family members. The family is often thrown into a traumatic period, being left with a significant void previously filled by the absent parent, regardless of how strong the parent was. For the remaining parent there is necessitated a major redefining of social and cultural norms. Children are no longer as protected or considered too young for an accelerated assumption of responsibilities. In Judaism, even a young child is encouraged to share the responsibility of saying *kaddish* for the full year upon death of a parent. At home, the youngsters suddenly find new responsibilities thrust upon them, including shopping, cooking, laundry, caring for a sibling or house-cleaning. While there are many traumas in these families, too often a mistake is made in assuming problems in one-parent families to have pathologic roots as if there were an out-of-control disease. We even neatly label and oversimplify what we do not understand by the appellation, "one-parent family kid with a problem." We do not often take into

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<sup>1</sup> S. Morton Altman, "Single Parent Families," *Viewpoints*, Nov. 1974, p. 5.

consideration that merely coming from such a family structure does not by itself breed dysfunction? It is essential to understand the living gestalt, the communication patterns, the restructuring and defining of roles and, most importantly, the unique set of needs of the one-parent family.

#### **The Jewish Community Center's Role with One-Parent Families**

Traditionally, the Jewish community center's social and recreational programs have been based on the needs of the intact family. In spite of this, the Center continues to attract large numbers of one-parent families, and why not? They are still functioning family units (in some cases more so than some intact families). It is our contention that many of the traditional "Y" services offered are developmentally needed by *all* families. However, it also becomes necessary to recognize that one-parent family members do have additional degrees of need based on a variety of factors and situations.

This article will give a better understanding of the thoughts and perceptions of teenagers from one-parent families through reporting work with a "rap" group composed specifically of such youth.

#### **Group Development**

We begin by describing some events leading up to the formation of this group. During the summer of 1975, a teen camp counselor became very upset about a talk she had just completed with one of her campers. It seems the discussion got around to the issue of parents. It turned out that the camper's father had died during the past year. Upon hearing this, the counselor replied, "Oh, I'm sorry, let's move onto something else. The camper responded, "Why are you changing the topic, I don't mind talking to you about my father?"

Both of the authors come from one-parent families and know what some of this is about. The senior author had been thinking for some time about developing some type of "rap" group for adolescents from one-parent families, wherein they could share their feelings with others. This would be similar to a regular

teen department "rap" group except that it would be limited to teenagers from single-parent families with both co-leaders from one-parent families as well. This seemed like the time to try it and a paragraph was placed in the Teen Department Fall Bulletin for "teenagers from one-parent families to register for a rap group to discuss anything on your mind."

As stated earlier, about 20 per cent of our teenagers at the "Y" are from single-parent families. The "rap" group was seen as a beginning in assessing the need of a special service for these youngsters. It is more than appropriate for this to be taking place at a community center. In fact, it adds a unique dimension. The teen worker develops continuing informal relationships with these teenagers over a period of months in teen camp and the winter program. One observation that emerged from the members themselves was that they were attracted to the group because of this previous relationship with the Teen Program and their trust of it. There are probably many community center workers who have similar relationships with youngsters like these. Such relationships generally serve to remove the major therapeutic stumbling blocks to winning trust and intimacy of adolescent clients.

After the co-leaders, one male and one female, agreed to proceed with the group, each drafted proposals individually. This included some of their assumptions about kids from one-parent families and their expectations for the group. A subsequent comparison of the two proposals found them to be quite similar. It was agreed that the group would comprise both girls and boys, ages 13-17 (the teen program's ages) and all from one-parent families. Interestingly, only Jerry briefly noted the issue of the different natures of single parent families. The senior author posed the question, what effect would there be in the group if half the group members had experienced a loss of a parent through death and the other half of the members experienced the loss of a parent, more symbolically, through separation or divorce, there being, still, two living parents? The question seems to

be a very important one. Do these two groups have enough commonalities to warrant meeting together to discuss mixed life experiences?

The authors did propose that any youngster who is living in a one-parent situation might likely be set apart in some aspects from other youngsters who are from intact two-parent families. Often, too, we assumed that these youngsters had experienced a major loss and may not have gone through a completed mourning process.<sup>2</sup> Some issues that we speculated might be shared in the group were common fears of losing the remaining parent, perhaps through death or remarriage; their relationship with the one parent with whom he/she is living, feelings of rivalry with siblings and feelings of being a burden to the parent at home. We expected that the group would serve as a source of mutual support and caring in which the members could express their emotions relatively comfortably, in an atmosphere where there would be empathy, honesty and support. For example, feelings of anger at being abandoned by the missing parent and feeling envy for other children who were living with both their parents might be shared in the group. Although major pathology in the youngsters was not assumed, we jointly proposed that ongoing assessment of individual members who might be in need of additional services was appropriate. We agreed that the group would be set up as a "rap" group. The topics for discussion would be arrived at with the group members and therefore, no planned topics of conversation would be suggested. Also the issues discussed in the group did not have to be concerns related only to living in a single family situation, but rather the group would be free to share their concerns about school, dating, self-image, etc. as a regular "rap" group might. The group was scheduled on a weekly basis for one hour. We planned that the group would evaluate their experience after ten weeks. This ten week assessment was planned so that the youngsters would be able to discuss

what the group was doing, whether the need was present to continue, and whether changes or additions to the structure or content of the group were indicated. During this assessment process we suggested parental and/or family involvement such as bi-monthly parent-teen meetings or meetings of parents, members and their siblings. Their response to this was overwhelmingly negative—they viewed this group as theirs and theirs alone.

Before the group commenced, there was a formal individual interviewing process. Our purpose in doing this was to screen out youngsters who really seemed to have little motivation in joining the group, or possibly a more severe disturbance than the group could have tolerated. We actually admitted a majority of the youngsters who inquired about the group. The group initially consisted of ten youngsters: nine females and one male, all white and the majority from low-middle income to middle income families. Half were from divorced homes and half from a family where one parent had died. All members lived with one of their parents, except the one boy who lived with his grandparents. In addition, two of the girls had lost their mothers through death and lived with their fathers. The remaining seven girls lived with their mothers. Finally the group was ready to begin. Our proposals were written with our speculations about what the group might be like, but we really were uncertain about the future of the group. Would the group exist after the first ten sessions? Would there be enough commonalities to join the group members? Would the members feel comfortable talking about the painful issues that they may not have been able to share with other people?

#### **The Group Process**

The leaders began the group by sharing their own one-parent family backgrounds and some historical perspectives on the beginnings of the group. The group members slowly shared their individual experiences. One of the first youngsters to talk was a thirteen-year-old from a multi-divorce situation—two by her mother and two by her father. She shared that, "All the years they weren't together I thought that I was different and if I find other kids who feel

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969.

the same way, I might feel better about myself and that I'm not different than anyone else."

Interestingly, almost all the members who shared their experiences initially were from divorced situations. When a member whose parent had died finally spoke, there was a flurry of whispering. In exploring this, the members who had experienced a death of a parent thought at the beginning of the group that all the members were from divorced situations and they were alone in their experiences. Although we tried to explore the group's feelings about the differences and what the effect would be on the group, members seemed to suggest that there were many commonalities. One member poignantly said, "Whether you are from a divorce, separation or death it is a tragic thing in your life, either way." The question of differences between the two types of one-parent situations seemed to subtly emerge in later group development, but did not become a major issue.

The process of the group seemed to remain fairly consistent throughout the group's life. At the beginning of most meetings there was a great deal of silence and awkwardness. Also, the group usually started with what we called "safe areas" of conversation, typically about school experiences. The "safe area" topics were usually talked about for the first fifteen minutes to a half-hour. Then one member usually shared an experience that happened during the week. Typically the group ended at the peak of conversation.

During the course of the group, major themes were repeatedly presented by the members. From the beginning, the members shared situations in which they had felt a great deal of embarrassment. As school is a safer subject, the group quickly moved to a discussion of their awkwardness, embarrassment and anger about their "Delaney cards". (These are information cards about the students that have the names of both parents.) One member stated, "My teacher said, 'Write your father's name down'; I didn't know what to do, so I wrote my mother's name again." The members shared their embarrassment as well as anger at teachers for common situations that they all seemed to be subjected to in school. Another embarrassing situation that was shared in the group is when the single parent is dating and friends ask questions about the identity of this person. "My mother is dating. When kids ask who the man is, I say he's my uncle; it's just so awkward."

The group began before the Thanksgiving

holidays which they described as a particularly depressing time. The members shared their feelings of loss of contact with the family of their missing parent and also as a sad reminder of some happier past holiday experiences. "On holidays we couldn't fit everyone in the room, now there aren't enough to fill up the table, since the divorce." This was a repeated pattern throughout the major holidays and birthdays during the year.

The members also talked about some of their feelings about the parent that they were living with. At the second meeting, a number of members stated that their parents were very curious about the group and wanted to know what was being discussed. Some members felt that this concern related to the parents' fear that they had blundered.

The issue of being different was also seen in their feeling older and growing faster than most of their friends who lived with both their parents, "I'm different than other kids. They are a bunch of babies. I'm not like them. I feel so different because I've lived through more than anyone else that I know. I'm only thirteen years old. I've lived through what my mother's lived through. Those two marriages and the crying and the breaking up. I can't tell my friends about this."

The members shared that they feel their role in the family is different with more demands made upon them than occurs in many two-parent family situations. This seemed to refer not only to more household responsibilities. The members often expressed strong concerns about their parent, almost reversing roles and stating they worried and were anxious about their parents, as a parent would be about a child. "Sometimes I worry about my mother, more than she worries about me", "I have to tell her what to wear when she goes on a date" are quotes from some of the youngsters.

With difficulty, the members shared some of their feelings about the actual event of the death or divorce. One member told of her initial denial; she thought it was a bad dream that her father had a fatal heart attack and that she would wake up and he would be okay. Similarly, one youngster from a divorce situation related that she couldn't remember the experience of being told that her parents were going to get divorced. They also spoke of their feelings of guilt and shame over past wishes of death for the parent who died or was not living in the home. "Sometimes I remember wishing he was dead, like I caused it. Death is permanent, you never really wish it

on a parent." During the discussion, some youngsters expressed that often times they wondered "If both parents were drowning, which would I save" or "which parent do I actually want to live with." These discussions seemed to validate for the members that they were not isolated or weird for having such thoughts, but rather that their experiences were common to many people who have lived through a death or divorce in their family.

Other difficult material shared in the group included acknowledging anger at the parent the child lived with. Many of the members indicated that sometimes when they talked about their mother or father in an angry way during the group, they left the group feeling guilty and sad. They said that they didn't want the group to think their parent was really mean. The anger for example at a parent's remarriage seemed to be made easier by the mutual support in the group and the common experiences. Also very sad experiences, such as pictures of a dead parent or cleaning the closet of a dead parent, were shared with a great deal of group support.

The group also spoke of their sensitivity about the survival of the parent with whom he/she lived. "Ever since my father died I am always scared that something is going to happen to my mother—I'll become an orphan" or "my mother usually gets home at 5:30—when she's late I get scared and upset. When she goes out on a date I worry about her crashing—who will let me know—I'll be alone."

Also many of the youngsters, especially those from divorced homes, said that they didn't know if they wanted to get married and if they did they wanted to get married at an older age than their parents did. "Especially if you've been through this, you know how hard it is for a marriage to work, if you've seen this..."

At the time of this writing, the group has changed slightly. It is now all female, eight members. The boy moved back with his father and two girls chose not to continue with the group. One new girl did join the group. The group has decided to continue in the Fall after a break for the summer. When we asked if they wanted to end the group, the overwhelming response was "end, what do you mean here." During a review of the process so far, there was the following dialogue:

**Worker #1:** Last week we started with the fact that one of the things we were discussing was when are we going to end this group and a lot of people said, end? what do you mean? Ending?

**Amy:** The way I feel, you know, it's like when I have a problem, you know, or I've just gone through something, when I talk about it I feel a lot better. So, I don't know, I feel a lot better when I come here.

**Worker #1:** Did other people say that last week? I think one of the other issues that people picked up last week was that after coming to this group they didn't feel like "freaks". Do you remember talking about it? Do you want to talk about it a little?

**Mindy:** What do you mean by freaks?

**Amy:** You know, like there are a lot of other people that have similar problems. If you don't know anybody else, you think, like, Oh God, I'm the only kid with this problem, and I can't talk to anybody about it. There's nobody else...well, certain people understand.

**Mindy:** I used to think that way but not any more. I have a lot of friends from parents who are divorced, but now, out of the whole population of the United States, there are more divorces than marriages. So, I got it all together now.

**Gail:** The thing is, I could talk to my friends about how I feel, but I feel like I'm being observed, or being studied by some of them, because it's new to them. Here, I can talk about my problems. You can't stop my problems, like with my mother, and other things, and everybody can't always give me the answers. Everybody else has experienced similar things as me... which makes you feel okay.

**Worker #2:** So the group isn't judging you the way you say other people do? I think other people were saying that last week also.

**Janine:** When you talk to your friends, they don't really understand what you mean. You go to a psychiatrist and they go "Uhhuh" but

they really don't understand and they don't really know your feelings. They never felt the same way. They're not from a divorced family—they don't feel the same way so it's not the same. Here, everyone feels what I feel, so I feel comfortable talking. It's much better than talking to anyone else.

Worker #1: You raised the issue last week of Diane and I both coming from one parent families and whether that was helpful or not helpful to people in this group.

Amy: I guess it is, sort of, because you seem to understand more of what it's like to be from a one-parent family. And you can't say "Oh well, you know, you'll get over it" and you know, all this that everyone says (with sarcasm)...(as in) "Don't worry, you'll get over it". So you know how it feels, so you help us, you know.

Worker #1: I guess I also don't feel pity; I don't think Diane feels that either.

Worker #2: Is that the kind of feeling you get from other people?

Mindy: Sometimes, it depends, I also pity myself.

Worker #2: What about this group, in terms of pity?

Mindy: It's not really pity. It's like we understand each other 'cause we're all going through the same thing.

### Summary

"Families with adolescents can be described as being in a state of transitional crisis characterized by confusion."<sup>3</sup> In the one-parent family, the loss of a parent intensifies the confusion for these adolescents. The added stress of parental loss is most difficult for an adult as well as an adolescent. The youngsters, should be allowed to ventilate their feelings of guilt, anger, and hurt.<sup>4</sup>

"If we tolerate their anger, whether it is directed at us, at the deceased, or at God, we are helping them take a great step towards acceptance without guilt. If we blame them for daring to ventilate such socially poorly tolerated thoughts, we are blameworthy for prolonging their grief, shame and guilt."<sup>5</sup>

It is important to recognize that the experience of loss by death has many characteristics that are similar to those experienced by divorce. However, in the process of divorce, the parent is living, and the loss may be interpreted as an additional rejection.<sup>6</sup>

One of the major foci of this year's group has been to help these adolescents who have experienced the death or divorce of parents verbalize their feelings and work on the process of mourning. It is important to note that this mourning does not only occur with recent loss but often remains buried and festers over many years. This has been demonstrated by the content of group discussions during the past year.

In summary, the youth in the group have been able to share initial denial over parental loss, their embarrassment over coming from a one-parent family, anger at the remaining parent, the parent who has been lost, siblings, teachers and themselves. They have also discussed their guilt over causing the parental loss, of burdening the remaining parent and fear of the loss of the remaining parent. They found the "rap" group to be a place where they could talk about these issues, without being judged and ostracized for being different.

Groups like these are appropriate and necessary in the Jewish community center. The single-parent family is very much a part of the Jewish community. It is important to view the single-parent family as having additional needs and tasks that make it different from the two-parent family. Difference here does not necessarily imply pathology, but elements of some dissimilarity of experience.

<sup>3</sup> Frances H. Scherz, "The Crisis of Adolescence in Family Life," *Social Casework*, Vol. XLVIII, April 1967, p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Kubla-Ross, *On Death and Dying*. Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., N.Y., 1969, p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Kubla-Ross, *On Death and Dying*. Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., N.Y., 1969, p. 180.

<sup>6</sup> Reva Wiseman, "Crisis Theory and the Process of Divorce," *Social Casework*, April 1975, pp. 205-12.

## Adoption and After

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*While obviously, there is in adoptive parenthood an extra dimension differentiating it from the biological family, which must be recognized in order to be dealt with effectively, we know there are many couples who are able to recognize and deal with this extra dimension without undue anxiety to themselves or confusion to their children. However, long ago the numbers of couples coming back to the agency, years past legal adoption, made inevitable the conclusion that many were faced with anxieties and conflicts beyond their capacities to deal with alone and so we were spurred to develop our post-adoptive services program.*

The title of this paper encompasses a broad subject. So much has been written and discussed regarding adoption, that I will attempt here only to do reasonable justice to the aspect of "after," at least by touching highlights.

### Needs For Service After Legal Adoption

Louise Wise Services is now in its 60th year and has placed over 7000 children for adoption. We have always been committed to the concept that adoption does not end with the placement of a child or the signing of a court order, but that it is rather an ongoing part of family life, developing with growth and changes in the child, in the parents, in the relationships of each to the others and to the circumstances of their lives. Since about 1953, we have given considerable thought and put considerable effort into the post-adoptive needs of our families and at this point, although there has been a drop in the numbers of children placed for adoption, our post-adoptive services have actually increased. It has become abundantly clear that while, at least in the near future, there will be many fewer children needing adoption, agencies have a broad and significant service to offer as more and more families are encouraged to seek the help they so obviously need to meet situations special to adoptive parenthood.

We need also to relate to the large numbers of non-agency adoptors, who are often in special need of these services. While of course

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our agency has responded to spontaneous requests for help from such couples, we have also felt an obligation to the community at large and have reached out through various media publicity to give assurance that the agency offers a warm welcome to all adoptive families who feel a need for help.

While obviously there is in adoptive parenthood an extra dimension differentiating it from the biological family which must be recognized in order to be dealt with effectively, we know there are many couples who are able to recognize and deal with this extra dimension without undue anxiety to themselves or confusion to their children. However, long ago the numbers of couples coming back to the agency years past legal adoption made inevitable the conclusion that many were faced with anxieties and conflicts beyond their capacities to deal with alone and so we were spurred to develop our post-adoptive services program, which is at present a twofold one, consisting of individual counseling and group discussion series, each type of service designed to meet differing needs.

The individual counseling service evolved first and continues as an answer mostly to two classifications of people: one group consists of adoptive parents who are troubled by emotional, physical or behavioral difficulties of their children or with the relationships within the family. A second group consists of adopted adults who are seeking knowledge about their origins and of natural parents seeking information about the child they long ago surrendered. Expectedly, all the clamor of