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# Parenting

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Module: Handling Critical Family Issues in  
the Context of Positive Parenting



Help a Child (HAC) is a Christian, child-focused development organization working with local Partners in Asia and Africa. The Head-office is based in the Netherlands where the organization is known under the name Red een Kind (REK).

Help a Child wants every child to have a loving and dignified existence and a promising future.

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## | Information for the Facilitator

**Goal of the Module:** To empower parents with knowledge on how to deal with critical issues such as: divorce, single parenting, polygamy, traditional and religious beliefs that have consequences on parenting and affect children's health and optimal development.

### **Introduction to the theme**

Critical issues in a family can have deep impact on the wellbeing of children. For a healthy child development, children need to feel safe and develop a sense of trust towards their parents and guardians. This calls for stable relationships in families that have the responsibility of caring for children.

However, many couples are able to bring forth children but face critical challenges to maintain a stable relationship in a home that can provide a safe and secure environment for child protection from different types of abuses including social, emotional, psychological and economic abuse. This happens because when there is discord between parents, the likely result is that children become neglected by both parents. It follows that when a mother or father is stressed, it will influence the quality of care given to the child. It is possible that the stressed parents will overreact when a child makes a small mistake. In this module we will look at some family challenges that have an influence on child development and discuss what parents and other important adults can do to support children during this critical time. Handling of polygamy, single parenthood due to divorce, separation and giving birth out of wedlock will be discussed in relation to creating a good environment for child upbringing.

In our communities divorce is becoming more and more of a trend where it has been observed that most marriages especially informal, do not take time to dissolve and take very little and sometimes no consideration of how such actions affect children. Children become vulnerable in the process of seeking to understand why their parents are no longer together. It is a situation that creates a vacuum that leaves much to be understood by the affected children.

In addition to divorce, there are other causes of single parenthood. This module will also look at single parenthood, temporary absence of a spouse from the family, or by a pregnancy out of wedlock (session 2).

Polygamy is also a factor that might bring confusion and stressful moments to children and will also be dealt with in this module. The practice brings with it aspects of jealousy and competition that results into family conflicts among the wives and children. In such an environment, good parenting competences are required to support the children to be able to overcome the challenges and develop to their fullest potential.

In most cases single parents, who are mostly women, are faced with both social and economic parenting challenges. Children are the most affected by these challenges as they suffer all forms of abuse including neglect from the only parent that is close to them. This hinders their

development compromising their own opportunities to break the cycle of poverty. In summary, the module intends to empower parents with general knowledge derived from the discussions on how best they can deal with the critical family issues in the process of providing positive parenting which results into positive child outcomes. The focus in this module is giving enough attention to every child even in times when a family is going through some issues.

### ***Important to know***

Like all other Modules and sessions covered, as facilitators avoid being a preacher and advisor—listen to what parents have to say. Try to create a culture where parents freely express their ideas, fears, needs, and aspirations. Be aware some issues might be sensitive to talk about or parents might be ashamed of. Please do respect this.

Exercises in the sessions will be more of sharing experiences some of which will empower parents on how best to deal with difficult situations for the sake of children.

Do a minor research of finding what other people who think about the sessions in discussions. That is how as a facilitator you can gain a little more to aide your facilitation.

**Key Message:** A good functional family is very central in providing a good environment for development for every child. Divorce, separation for different reasons whether positive or not and polygamy puts more burden of care on the single remaining parent, in this case a mother! If the mother is not well supported with meaningful empowerment strategies, the single parent become overwhelmed. It is therefore critical that both parents together with the community support children to their optimal development regardless of the family circumstances. in



### *Session build up*

<b>Session Title</b>	<b>Content of the session</b>
<b>1. Separation &amp; Divorce causing single parenting</b>	Separation and Divorce, its effects on children and ways of dealing with it for good parenting
<b>2. Single Parenting due to absence of spouse</b>	Dealing with long absence of father and dealing with having a child out of wedlock
<b>3. Polygamy</b>	Good parenting practices in the context of polygamy

# Session 1: Divorce & Separation causing Single Parenting



- Goal:** To determine best ways of promoting good parenting in the midst of divorce in the family
- Materials:** A flipchart, papers, marker and pencils
- Duration:** About one and a half hours

## | Introduction for the Facilitator

### *Introduction to the theme*

A good warm relationship between a mother and father creates a warm and safe environment for every child to grow and thrive. However there are times when parents have issues to sort out, and eventually may lead to separation or divorce, In such a scenario, children's welfare should be at the center of every decision that would be made. Both parents must continue to take responsibility for every child involved. The parent that will have the day to day responsibility of child rearing, which would likely be a mother or a grandmother should be supported both socially and economically

### *Important to know*

#### Divorce, Separation and Parenting

A solid functional marriage is very vital in creating a good environment where every child can thrive and develop their full potential. Unfortunately, it is not every marriage relationship that is functional and able to provide such a conducive environment for good child development. Some marriage relationships are marked by so much strife and misunderstandings which may lead to separation and/or divorce. This scenario among married people is not a new thing. It has been there since time in memorial in every society. Such situations are challenging, not only to the parents concerned, but to children as well. Children get affected by this socially, emotionally and economically. Children react differently, depending on the level of their own resilience and coping mechanisms and their social support network. Some children feel guilty, thinking that it is their fault that their parents are quarreling or are divorced. They might feel anxious and depressed. Others react more aggressive and get behavioral problems or even end up doing criminal things.

If this home situation is not well handled, such children may be negatively affected in achieving their developmental milestones which in turn limits achieving their full potential in life. The role of parents and the community at large is to support the family in times of conflicts, separation or divorce, whereby it is important to focus on the welfare of children.

Issues of child support in terms of meeting their social, emotional and economical needs should be agreed upon and adhered to so that every child should thrive even in times parents are no longer love birds.

## | Exercises

### Welcome



#### *Exercise 1: Group Discussions divorce situations in our community*

Time: about 20 minutes

1. Split the group in small groups of max. 6 parents. Give each group a big paper and some markers.
2. Discuss together if divorce is happening often in our community.
3. What are the consequences for children? List the specific things that will affect children.
4. If the father and mother have decided to divorce, what can be put into place to ensure that children receive the best support possible from both parents?
5. What can the community do to reduce the negative effects of divorce on children?

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#### *Feedback to the group*

It was interesting to share the experiences each one of us know about divorce leading into single parenting. From the discussions we had in our groups, focus was on what challenges are faced by children when parents decide to separate or divorce and how these can be addressed so that children receive the best care possible even in such challenging times. The community options what can be done to support the parents and children in such situations are important too. The key message is that it is possible to support children from broken families to develop well and realize their fullest potential.

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#### *Exercise 2: Role Playing*

Time: about 30 minutes

1. Split the group in two groups
2. A group will role play on:
  - a. A demonstration on impacts of divorce that is **not well** managed on children or challenges faced by single parents and impact on children.
  - b. The next group will role play on a demonstration on impacts of divorce that is **well** managed on children or challenges faced by single parents and impact on children.



3. Let the 2 groups prepare the role plays (max 10 min).
4. Show the role plays to each other.
5. Bring to the whole group to discuss what they observed.

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### ***Feedback to the group***

Thank you for these role plays! It makes it very clear: divorce does have impact on parents themselves of course, but also on the children. So when it happens, we have to keep in mind what children need in terms of social and emotional support to deal with the situation.

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### ***Closure***

Thank you everyone for your active participation in this session. I have no doubt that each one of us has had a lesson learned to these issues. Let us all remember that let us commit ourselves into keeping our relationship sacred. It is all for the best interest of the child to have a good start in life and enjoy it to the fullest.

*Close the gathering with a song, dance or prayer.*

## **| Homework**

Find out from our community day to day practices on how children can be supported in their development when their families are dysfunctional?

## Session 2: Single Parenting due to Absence of Spouse



**Goal:** To promote good parenting practices for children being raised by a single parent

**Materials:** A flipchart, papers, marker and pencils,

**Duration:** About one and half hours

### | Introduction for the Facilitator

#### *Introduction to the theme*

##### Separation Due to Migration

Apart from divorce and separation due to family conflicts, there are also some other reasons why separate and one ends up as a single parent. An example single parenthood created from having a spouse working too far from home, leaving children with the other spouse with the primary responsibility of child care. In Malawi, there are high number of people, especially men that migrate to South Africa in search of more income and a better living. Whilst migration to other places in search of a better life will always be there, the welfare of children in the absence of the other parent should be central. For a family that has children, it should be made clear that meeting the social, emotional and economic needs of children should be at the heart of each parent. Therefore, when one parent is away, there should be clear agreed upon ways of communication between the absent parent and the children so that the child-parent bond is maintained. In addition, the parent that has gone in search for more resources should be aware that the best investment he/she can make with the resources secured is investing it in his/her children. For investment in children has proved to produce good returns even at household level.

In addition to the issue of migration that result into single parenthood, there is also an issue of children being born out of wedlock. Much as the rates of teenage pregnancies is relatively low in our communities, there is high levels of stigma, such that girls that become parents at that tender age are not supported and do not get the basic parenting skills. Maybe the girl (and boy who impregnated the girl!) made a mistake, but they still need our support. Or maybe it was not the mistake of the girl, but she got pregnant after rape. Then she absolutely needs the support of the community around her.

This lack of support to both the child and the teen-mother may have a negative impact on both the teen-mother and the child in their full participation in development. It is therefore

critical that teen-mothers AND fathers must be included in parenting programs. This will ensure that the teen-mothers and -fathers learn practical ways of child care and if possible even go back school. In addition, ensuring good early development for children gives the children a window to escape the cycle of poverty.

### **Important to know**

Children's needs in all aspects of their development (physical, social, emotional, spiritual) are critical at all times. Children need continuous support if they have to grow into productive citizens. Special attention has to be paid to children's emotional and psychological needs where they are being taken care of by one parent. The spirit of taking responsibility for children one has given birth to must be inculcated in everyone whether man or female.

In parenting groups, it is important to include everyone including teen-mothers and -fathers that have given birth out of wedlock. Such forums will give them comprehensive knowledge, skills and emotional support that will empower them for better decision making in future relationships.

**Key Message:** Children are a resource. Good investment must be invested in their early years for good developmental outcomes. Ways must always be found on how best this can be done regardless of their background. That is whether a child is born to a teen-mother, or the other parent (mostly a father) has migrated to other countries and is being taken care by a single parent (in this case a mother) must be given a good start in life. Both parents, mother and father must participate in childcare, albeit in different ways.

## **| Exercises**

### **Welcome**

Welcome once again! It's good to see you all again! Last time we looked at divorce and separation as a result of conflicts in the family. Our discussion centered around the fact that even in the heat of such conflicts, a good parent will continue to care and support his or her child. Today we will talk about how single parents for example parenting a child out of wedlock or single parenting due to the other parent migrating to other foreign lands for greener pasture. We will look at all possible ways to make parenting smoother and more meaningful even when the other parent is not around. How can these single parents be helped to raise their children in the absence of the other spouse?

Did you do your assignment? Your thoughts and ideas of how to help children in challenging family situation, will help you to do the exercises in this session.



### **Exercise 1: Role Playing**

Time: about 30 minutes

1. Split the group into two groups and make a role play of on the following scenes:

**Group 1:** A father has gone to South Africa in search of more resources. In South Africa, he got himself a job. He was able to keep in touch with his family for the first 2 months. Thereafter, there was silence. No phone calls, no letters, and he does not send money to support his wife and the 2 children that he left at home.

**Group 2:** A father has gone to South Africa in search of more resources. In South Africa, he got himself a job. He is excited that he is employed and is getting some income. He uses some of the money to make constant phone calls back home so that he can talk with his wife and children. He is updated on the status of the family. He is aware of all issues in his home like sickness of a child and even when one child was showing signs of lack of interest in school. In addition, he send money to the wife to support the daily needs of the home. He ensures that he comes home for holiday at least, once a year.

**2. Discuss the following questions:**

**Group 1**

- Do we have such kind of situations in our community?
- Can we describe the plight of the children and the wife?
- For the best development of every child, there is need for good bonding with both parents. In this case, how bonded are these children with the father in the absence of communication and support? What are the social emotional effects on him that he is not bonded to his children? What are the effects?
- What other effects can the silence have on the wife? Why?
- In the absence of financial support from the father, what would be the possible consequences on the wife and the children?
- What can the community do to support the family to avert the situation as above?

**Group 2**

- Do we have such kind of situations in our community?
- Can we describe the plight of the children and the wife?
- For the best development of every child, there is need for good bonding with both parents. In this case, how bonded are these children with the father with the available good communication and support? What would be the possible social and emotional developmental outcomes of these children that have contact with the father in his absence?
- What is the level of likelihood that this woman would fall in love with another man in the absence of her husband? Why?
- In the absence of financial support from the father, what would be the possible consequences on the wife and the children?
- What can the community do to support the family to remain true and faithful to each other?

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### ***Feedback to the Group***

Thank you for this lively discussion on family situations in the context of labour migration to South Africa. It is important to note while the ideal parenting scenario is when the father and mother are both physically available to support each other, it is also possible for couples to support each other as partners in parenting when they are living apart. Our role is to support all parents to support their children regardless of their family situation.

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### ***Exercise 2: What would it be like?***

Time: about 30 minutes

1. Ask participants to be silent for 30 seconds.
2. Let the participants walk around the place where they are for 3 minutes.
3. As they are walking around, let each of them think of his or her village. Think of every girl and woman that has had a child out of wedlock in the past 5 years. What would it be like to be that girl or woman? And what would it be like to be that child?
4. After the reflection walk, come and sit in the group.
5. Let us discuss the following questions:
  - How many girls and women became pregnant out of wedlock in your village for the past 5 years?
  - What was your response when you got the news? If you were the mother or father of the girl, what was your response? And what was the community's response?
  - What do you think are the underlying causes of the responses that you had? What about the community, what was the underlying cause of the response?
  - Reflect on the situations of the individual girls and women that became pregnant out of wedlock, are there some cases that have positive stories of their come back to life that we can learn from? Can we share their specific experiences so that we can learn from them? What specific things did the girls or women themselves do to be able to positively handle their situation? How did their family support them?
  - Is there ways that the community can come up to ensure the reduction of teenage pregnancies yet support those that get pregnant with good parenting skills so that their children get a good foundation in their early life?

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### ***Feedback to the group***

Thank you for sharing your knowledge about pregnancies out of wedlock and parenting. It is important to note that as parents, our role is to ensure that teenage pregnancies are eliminated from our society. Every girl (and boy) should be given the chance to access her right to education. But in the event that a girl falls pregnant at a young age, either forced or after consent, as is still the practice in our communities, such girls (and boys!) should be supported with good parenting skills so that they are able to give a good foundation to their children to realise their optimal potential, while the teen-mothers and -fathers are also supported to bounce back into the society and pursue their educational goals. This is possible and we can do it. Yes, we can!

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### ***Closure***

Thank you all for your participation! It is good we have seen now that although circumstances can be tough, we still have a choice and a chance to be a good parent, and to support other parents and their children even if they live in difficult circumstances. And we have seen it is important to try to think what it would be like, if it was you who is in such a situation. Judging is for God, not for us, people.

## **| Homework**

Think of your own children and the children in your community. How would they feel if they live in a home of conflict? And how would they feel in a home of harmony?

*Close the gathering with a song, dance or prayer*



## Session 3: Polygamy

- Goal:** To empower parents in a polygamous relationship with knowledge and skills on best parenting practices for good child development
- Materials:** Flipchart, papers, markers
- Duration:** About one and a half hours

### | Introduction for the Facilitator

#### *Introduction to the theme*

This session will provide us with practical skills on good parenting practices in a polygamous relationship.

#### *Important to know*

Polygamy is a situation where a man marries more than one wife. It is a cultural tradition in many African Cultures where a man is allowed to have more than one woman as a wife. It is an appealing trend especially among men. Some men find it to be a 'status thing' to have more wives. To them it is an indicator of 'wealth'. In addition the polygamous man finds the system to be working to his advantage as he can move from one woman to another depending on where his interest are at the time. In our contexts, in a situation like this where a woman is in a polygamous relationship, her choices are limited as it would be difficult to stay in the relationship and it is difficult to move out of it. Most women choose to hang on to such a relationship despite the challenges. Among the many reasons are poverty, stigma and discrimination, fear of being perceived as a scandalous woman who moved away from a man. In Malawi social context, a woman can only be chased from a man and not move out on her own. It is disgraceful to do that. For this reason, a man has the privilege of marrying more than one woman and keep them all. Women can also stay alongside each other as wives so long the man has not chased any of them. From observation of the practice, there is evidence that a polygamous relationship is more complex and challenging than a monogamous one. There is usually much strife, jealousy and conflicts between the wives which later includes the children.

In the context of the strife, jealousy and conflicts, children are the most affected. Firstly, their parents use their energy in managing conflicts and not on parenting. As children get neglected they get negatively affected in all areas of their development. With time, children join their mother's side forming team's and cliques of 'war' and conflict. The results are that they get distracted from their studies, fail to develop into balanced social and emotional beings and also fail to achieve their optimal developmental potential and remain in the cycle of poverty. Despite the challenges that polygamy brings, it is a rampant practice that is traditionally accepted in most Malawian communities. To break the vicious cycle of poverty,

children in these families need to be supported to develop to their fullest potential and become productive citizens. The question that this module will try to answer is: What can be done to minimize the effects of polygamy on children? What can communities do to ensure that such children get their full social and economic support from their parents?

As facilitators we need to make it clear that for the sake of the child, parents should know that it is their responsibility to make sure the child is holistically supported to develop into a productive and healthy child.

Apparently our rural areas are poor. In this context of polygamy and limited resources, the concerned family is required to prioritize investing in children in the distribution of their resources. It is critical that polygamous families must increase their sources of income to support their large families.

**Key Message:** Despite the challenges that polygamy brings, the practice is still in our communities and might take time to phase out. Our role is to create an enabling environment for children in polygamous relationship to grow out of poverty and develop to their fullest potential.

## | Exercises

### *Welcome and recap*

Welcome once again! It's good to see you all again! Last time we looked at divorce and its impacts on child development as well as on parents. Today we will talk about how we can help parents married in a polygamous relationship become effective parents. Have you thought of the assignment of last week? Did you try to think how children will feel in a peaceful home and in a home with conflicts? (let some people share).

It is important to realize that we do not judge! What we want to look at is what it means for our children. Let's do the first exercise.



### *Exercise 1: Group discussion*

Time: about 30 minutes

1. Make separate groups of men and women. Make sure the groups are not bigger than about 6 people in a group, otherwise it is difficult for everybody to share their opinion.
2. Discuss the following in the groups
  - a. What do you like or admire about polygamous relationships?
  - b. What do you not like about polygamous relationships?
  - c. What would you advise their son who wants to marry a second wife or daughter who wants to get married as a second wife?

- d. What is your opinion on polygamy, is it a practice that should be promoted?  
Why or why not?
3. Come back in the whole group and let the several groups give a few brief of their discussion to the other groups.



### **Exercise 2: Role Play**

Time: about 30 minutes

1. Ask about 10 parents to roleplay. Divide them in 2 groups.
2. **Group 1 plays the following scenario:**  
A polygamous family has issues with jealousy, competition and conflicts. The family's resources are limited. The husband and his wives are not in harmony and the children are suffering in several ways.  
**Group 2 plays the following scenario:**  
A polygamous family has issues with jealousy, competition and conflicts. The family's resources are limited. The husband and his wives realize this is not helping their children. They need to change.
3. After the roleplays, discuss the issues raised in plays:
  - a. In what ways children are affected in such a relationship? Think of good ways and bad ways.
  - b. What can be done to make the situation better?

**Important Point to Note:** As a facilitator, be respectful and sensitive in handling the negative consequences as some parents are in polygamous relationships and consciously encourage a lot of sharing among the parents themselves as this could be helpful.

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### **Feedback to the group**

Thank you for sharing your experiences and knowledge on how polygamy as an issue can have impact on children. It is important to realize that despite the challenges of polygamy, it is possible to promote good parenting among polygamous couples. It is a choice both husband and wives have to make: how do we support our children, no matter what? In doing that, children from such relationships will develop healthy human beings who are able to exploit their fullest potential and break the cycle of poverty on their life.

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### **Exercise 3: What did you learn?**

Time: about 15 minutes

1. Gather everyone together again in a circle for a group talk.
2. Ask questions at what they have learned in the module, what they will share with others, etc. Is there something they have missed in this module? Make sure everyone gets a moment to share their experience!

3. Concrete actions: what are parents going to do? Is there someone who wants to share? What are they going to tell their neighbors? How are they going to support the children in the village (*name the village*) in their social and emotional development? Is there already a Children's Club or is there a possibility to start one? Help the parents to come in action to use everything they have learned!

### ***Closure***

*Close the gathering with a song, dance or prayer.*

## Annex 1 - Sample sheet for keeping the Records - Parenting Manual

Name of the module:

Name of the facilitator(s):

Date:



## Attendance list

[illegible]

## Group Evaluation

*At the end of the module, evaluate the module together with the parents. Discuss these questions below and write down the answers that come forward.*

1. What have you learned from this module?
2. Did you miss anything? What else would you have liked to learn about this theme?
3. Do you already use something you have learned in this module in your daily life? If so, how and what were the results? If not, what is keeping you from using it?



4. What can you do after this module as parents in your family?

5. Question for all parents: what can you do after this module as a group?

Other comments: