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The Push For Parent Education: Blueprints For Helping Families Cope With Divorce

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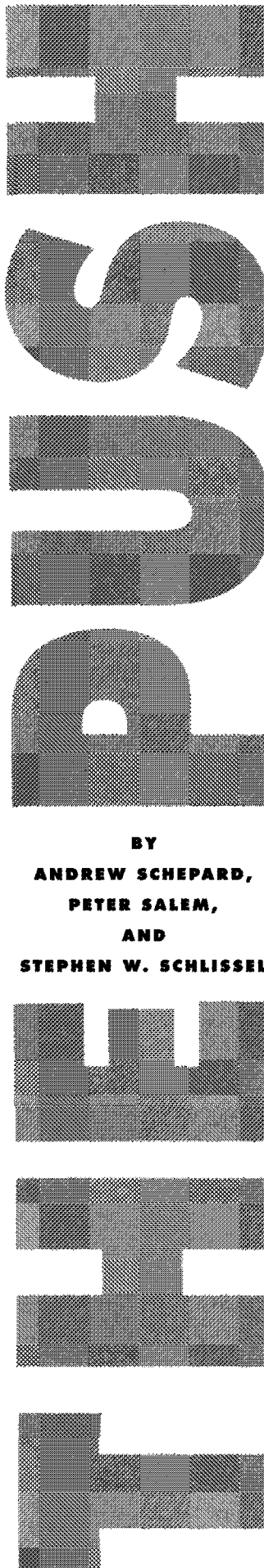
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FOR PARENT EDUCATION

**Blueprints for helping
families cope with
divorce**

**It is a sea of confusion, anger and
fear out there. And most of us don't
know how to swim...**

—Parent participant in New York's
P.E.A.C.E. (Parent Education and
Custody Effectiveness) Program.

Courts in more than 40 states now offer separated and divorcing parents, and, in some cases, their children, educational programs to help them with the difficult transitions they face when their families reorganize. Two recent national surveys conducted by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) and researchers at Western Michigan University combined to identify more than 560 programs, 80 percent of which were created since 1990.

Legislation in at least 13 states authorizes courts to implement parent education programs. Connecticut, Utah, and Arizona mandate that all divorcing and separating parents attend. In many other states, court rules implement parent education programs without legislation.

Why are courts actively creating educational programs for separated

and divorcing parents and children? The short answer is that they offer an extremely valuable service: information and perspective. They help parents and children normalize their experiences and begin to understand the emotional, social, and legal complexities of divorce and separation. The objective is not to resolve specific disputes, but to provide parents with information and an incentive to resolve conflicts collaboratively.

Children usually do best when their parents cooperate after divorce and separation. The anger and disorientation that many adults experience during divorce can make such cooperation difficult, but not impossible. Contrary to what many parents who are embroiled in the process believe, their relationships are not static. Most move along a continuum somewhere between hopelessly conflicted and completely cooperative. Educational programs help families identify their place on the continuum and provide information that can help them move toward a more cooperative end.

No parent education program is

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PAIRS Teaches

'Thee' to Be 'We'

Traditionally, marriages have been based on security, stability, and raising children. Today, however, relationships are founded on love and intimacy. Yet many people grew up without appropriate examples of how to build, nurture, and sustain loving, intimate relationships with spouses and family members. PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills) is a practical psychoeducational program that teaches these skills and provides the personal tools and the understanding needed to build lasting healthy relationships with love, pleasure, and happiness for both partners.

To find out more about PAIRS Founder Lori H. Gordon, how her program works, and where it is available in your community, call toll-free 888/PAIRS-4U or visit the PAIRS Internet site at <http://www.pairs.com/home.htm>

"typical." They come in a wide variety of formats including lecture, interactive role play, group discussion, and demonstration and video. Presenters are lawyers, judges, psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, and others. Programs vary in length from 30 minutes to 12 hours; the most popular is four to six hours broken into two or three sessions. Classes may have as few as 10 participants or as many as 150.

In some jurisdictions, parents do not attend the same session; in others, they are expected to attend together. However, most states offer spouses the option of attending separately. Some programs include information on the legal process, while others focus solely on emotional issues. Programs operate in courthouses as well as community centers, universities, churches, and synagogues.

Although content varies, the core of most programs is the same. Generally, court-affiliated educational programs emphasize that parents should solve problems rather than find fault with each other. AFCC's recent survey found that the most intensively covered topic is the benefits of parental cooperation versus the costs of parental conflict.

The most important beneficiaries of parent education programs are the children. During divorce and separation, children may blame themselves, feel compelled to choose sides, or assume parental responsibilities. Programs help parents cope with these typical reactions. Some jurisdictions take a further step and develop educational programs for children. These court-based programs fill an important gap.

Following are portraits of four different court-affiliated educational programs from around the United States. Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness (P.E.A.C.E.) is a New York program for parents, which includes education about the legal process of divorce and separa-

tion, as well as its financial and emotional impact on parents and children. Kids' Turn is a San Francisco program that involves parents but is aimed primarily at children. Families in Transition is a Louisville, Kentucky, program that brings children and parents together. Parents Apart is a program in Massachusetts that focuses on the continuum of postseparation relationships from cooperative to conflict-ridden. For parents whose level of conflict precludes cooperation, the program teaches "parallel parenting" skills.

P.E.A.C.E.

I do not speak to my client every day now. There is not nearly the animosity that existed before the program. And, finally, and most importantly, the two parties for the first time are sitting down and coherently discussing some sort of an agreement leading to custody and dispute resolution, without trying to kill each other.

—Comment from attorney whose client attended P.E.A.C.E.

P.E.A.C.E. (Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness) is an interdisciplinary program for divorcing and separating parents, which provides education on three topics: (1) the legal process for making child-related determinations; (2) the adult experience of divorce and separation; and (3) the child's experience of divorce and separation and how parents can help their children cope with this transition.

P.E.A.C.E.'s curriculum resulted from interdisciplinary collaboration between lawyers and mental health professionals through a joint project of Hofstra University School of Law and its Graduate Programs in Marriage and Family Counseling. P.E.A.C.E. is cosponsored by the Interdisciplinary Forum on Mental Health and Family Law, an umbrella organization of leading mental health and family law groups in New York.

P.E.A.C.E. currently has programs in nine New York counties, in both rural and urban settings. Local programs are organized by volunteer local advisory committees of judges, court administrators, lawyers, and mental health professionals with support from the P.E.A.C.E. Project at Hofstra. The local advisory committee is responsible for identifying volunteer lawyers and mental health professionals to serve as presenters. Presenters are prohibited from soliciting or accepting parents who participate in that particular session of the program as clients or patients.

In most cases, the court strongly encourages parents to attend P.E.A.C.E., although some referrals come from lawyers and mental health professionals. The program is generally free or available for a modest charge (\$30-\$50), which is waived for the indigent.

Within broad guidelines, the local P.E.A.C.E. advisory committee is responsible for setting policy for program administration in their communities. In Nassau County, for example, P.E.A.C.E. is presented in three two-hour sessions over a three-week period. In contrast, Erie County (Buffalo) presents its P.E.A.C.E. program in a five-hour Saturday session, because the format is most convenient for local participants.

Most P.E.A.C.E. programs use a standard curriculum, which combines large group presentations with small group discussions. Some, however, use only small groups.

The reactions of parents to P.E.A.C.E. are typical of reactions to parent education programs throughout the country. Research indicates that 80 percent of participating parents said that their knowledge about families and divorce increased because of attendance. More than 95 percent said that they would use what they learned. More than 90 percent said that they would recommend P.E.A.C.E. to others.

When asked what was "most helpful" about P.E.A.C.E., parent responses included:

- information about shared custody;
- learning to focus on the child's best interests;
- learning to communicate;
- coping with single parenthood;
- asking questions;
- realizing the importance of cooperation;
- realizing the need for individual counseling;
- information on the child's experience of divorce; and
- guidelines for giving children a normal life.

Many parents initially resented being required to attend. However, after attending, 80 percent of this unwilling audience felt that the courts should require all divorcing and separating parents to attend as a condition of divorce. These results are virtually identical to surveys conducted by parent education programs in other jurisdictions.

Kids' Turn

This program is one of my favorite things.

— 9-year-old participant

Everyone could talk and open their hearts and tell what they feel.

— 13-year-old participant

Kids' Turn is a child-oriented educational program for San Francisco Bay-area families that are reorganizing. It is focused on children ages 4-14 and offered at four sites. The program was founded by lawyers, and children are referred to it by the courts. Parents are charged a sliding-scale fee, and the course is taught by qualified professionals with backgrounds in education or psychology.

In six 90-minute workshops spread over six weeks, Kids' Turn teaches children the skills to help them cope with the family changes

that occur when parents divorce or separate. The program also provides information to help parents help their children.

Workshops use an educational approach and incorporate age-appropriate games and activities to help children learn most effectively. Children learn: (1) to identify and communicate their feelings about their parents' separation or divorce, (2) ways to talk about these changes with other children and adults at home and at school; (3) some basic concepts about the legal process of divorce and child-custody decision making; and (4) problem-solving methods for dealing with conflict-laden situations that children of divorce frequently encounter.

Families in Transition

I was pleasantly surprised that something court-ordered could be so helpful to me and my children... This program has been a special gift to me in the middle of a great deal of anguish and pain

— Parent participant

Families in Transition (FIT) is a divorce-adjustment program in Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky. It is one of the few programs that require both parents and children (ages 8 to 16) to attend. One parent and the child(ren) attend concurrent but separate sessions, while the other parent attends the program at a separate time. A "parents together" program is available if both parents independently select this option.

FIT is six hours long and is offered in weekly two-hour sessions over a three-week period. Weekend and evening sessions are available. The program is community-based, with classes offered at churches, family service agencies, and schools.

The FIT curriculum has five major objectives: (1) to increase children's competence by teaching specific skills to identify divorce-

Better Matches

Make Better Marriages

PARTNERS is a high-school curriculum designed to teach students the communication and negotiation skills needed to resolve common relationship problems. This nationally televised interactive course helps students understand how common misconceptions can lead to inappropriate mate selection. Students are trained to identify the key qualities they want in a mate and how to select someone with compatible personality traits.

PARTNERS uses role playing to show couples how to overcome personal differences and work together to manage the stresses of daily life. The program, developed by the ABA Family Law Section, is taught in five 50-minute sessions, broadcast live via satellite by the Cambridge-based Massachusetts Center for Educational Telecommunications (MCET). A videotaped version is also available.

Attorneys, law firms, bar associations, concerned citizens, and civic groups may sponsor PARTNERS in their local high schools through the ABA/FLS Adopt-A-School program. For more information, call 312/988-5603 or visit the Section's Internet site at <http://www.abanet.org/family/partners/curriculum.html>

related feelings in themselves and others; (2) to reduce feelings of isolation and misperception about divorce; (3) to increase children's awareness of how divorce affects their parents; (4) to increase awareness of appropriate ways children respond to anger; and (5) to develop parental competence by teaching skills to handle life-adjustment issues, children's divorce-related concerns, the parental relationship, and parent-child relationship. Children's programs are primarily activity-based, whereas parents' programs use open discussion, role plays, and small group exercises.

Positive response

FIT research found that more than 90 percent of participating parents found FIT to be "somewhat helpful" or "very helpful" in their efforts to deal with divorce-related issues concerning their children. An informal telephone survey one-year after the program found that only 10 percent of families returned to court within the year on child-related issues. This represents a significant drop from the approximately 33 percent of divorcing families who historically have initiated litigation one year postdecree on child-related matters.

FIT enjoys the strong support of the Jefferson County Family Court judges, the Family Law Section of the Louisville Bar Association, and the University of Louisville, all of which have representatives on the FIT Advisory Board.

Parents Apart

Personally, I needed a gentle reminder that even though I am most anxious to end our marital relationship, he and I will always be the parents of four children.

—Parent participant

Parents Apart is a five-hour program offered at seven sites throughout Massachusetts. A collaborative effort

between the University of Massachusetts Medical Center Department of Psychiatry and Family Services of Central Massachusetts, Parents Apart is designed to be taught by two mental health professionals with expertise in children's issues related to divorce.

Most parent education programs emphasize the importance of parental cooperation and teach cooperative parenting strategies. Parents Apart takes a different approach. It suggests that postdivorce parenting relationships progress from parallel to cooperative. Like many programs, Parents Apart teaches that the parental relationship must be good for the children and manageable for the adults. Although communication, flexibility, and respectful behavior are an ideal, Parents Apart points out that intensive interpersonal conflict may result if parents are not ready to cooperate.

Parents Apart recommends parallel parenting for those unable to cooperate. In parallel parenting, each parent assumes total responsibility for the children during the time they are in his or her care. Although Parents Apart acknowledges that parallel parenting may not be ideal for children, the program considers it far superior to exposing children to ongoing parental conflict.

Parenting Tips

Parents Apart provides tips for successful parenting along the entire parallel/cooperative parenting continuum.

The program uses a handbook, slides, videotape, role plays, and hypothetical situations to keep participants actively engaged and to maximize learning. Topics include adults' and children's responses to divorce, research findings on the impact of divorce on children, and common parental pitfalls.

Although empirical research is still ongoing, participants have provided positive feedback and appear to find the program meaningful.

How lawyers can help

Parent education programs are providing useful information and perspective on family reorganization to parents and children throughout the country. The programs need the support of lawyers and courts to help families—and especially children—adjust to the difficult transitions that divorce and separation create. By participating in these programs, family lawyers can not only play an important role in community education and prevention but increase public understanding of the legal process.

Lawyers can help support parent education programs by:

- encouraging courts and bar associations to sponsor a parent education program if one does not already exist or work with

the local mental health community to create one;

- attending classes offered by local parent education programs, learning what they do and teach, and offering to work with the program in ways that will effectively use his or her legal expertise;
- encouraging parent-clients to participate immediately in parent education classes;
- suggesting that opposing counsel also recommend parent education classes to his or her client for the sake of the children;
- donating your time and expertise to serve as a presenter, board member, fundraiser, or in any other way that can be helpful to the growth of local parent education programs. ■

Additional resources

AFCC Directory of Parent Education Programs (1996) (Brief program descriptions and contact people.) Available from AFCC, 329 W. Wilson Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53703; 608/251-4001, fax: 608/251-2231.

Andrew Schepard, *War and P.E.A.C.E.: A Preliminary Report and a Model Statute on an Interdisciplinary Educational Program for Divorcing and Separating Parents*, 27 U. Mich. J. L. Ref. 131 (Fall, 1993).

Andrew Schepard & Stephen W. Schlissel, *Planning for P.E.A.C.E.: The Development of Court-Connected Education Programs for Divorcing and Separating Families*, 23 Hofstra L. Rev. 845 (1995).

Special Issue: Parent Education in Divorce and Separation, 34 FAMILY AND CONCILIATION COURTS REVIEW No. 1 (January 1996) (Essays and research reports on parent education programs throughout the country.)

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Get the Facts

About the Family

Is it the single institution that can save the world or will its downfall doom society as we know it? According to Dr. John E. Murray, Jr., president of Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, no institution has been so maligned or mythologized as the American family. But what storehouse of factual information do we have to substantiate our theories and formulate our solutions? When Dr. Murray, a lawyer and former law school dean, discovered that no single comprehensive research center on the family existed, he set out to set one up.

In January 1997, the Duquesne University Family Institute opened its doors. The first phase of the program will be to create a database of critical studies on the family from a multidisciplinary perspective. Phase two will be to evaluate existing research and to generate new electronic and print materials for K-12 as well as college and university texts. The institute also plans to link research facilities and provide Internet access to materials.

If, as many experts theorize, the disintegration of the family is the single most critical problem we face as we move toward the twenty-first century, then we must do something about it, Murray insists. "Most experts agree that the basic family structure is essential for the development of the child. Divorce is a big part of the problem. A single working parent today has to be heroic. Our goal is to provide assistance to that person and to all families."

To find out more about the Duquesne University Family Institute or to contribute to its database, call the Office of the President at 412/396-6000.