

FOCUS

ON

Co-Parenting through Divorce



OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION SERVICE

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In order to help divorcing parents consider the family's future from the child's point of view, judges throughout Oklahoma are requiring parents of minor children to enroll in a Co-Parenting through Divorce class before the final decree is granted. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Educators and 4-H Youth Development Educators teaching the class encourage parents to put aside their own anger and frustration for a few hours and think about their children's needs.

The class session focuses on the developmental needs of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, school-age children, and teenagers. The participants receive research-based information about how children at various ages respond to stress and change, how to tell the children about the divorce, and age-appropriate custody and visitation arrangements.

Divorcing parents are encouraged to develop communication patterns and co-parenting lifestyles that allow their children to continue a loving relationship with both parents for the rest of their lives. Non-custodial parents, usually the dads, are encouraged to maintain daily meaningful contact with their children by providing transportation to and from school or phone calls to help with homework. We are working to prevent the prevalent pattern of divorced fathers losing all contact with their children within ten years of the divorce.

Most parents do not want to attend the class, but before they leave, many are asking for more. Most parents write that they will try to communicate with their ex-spouse and not say unkind things about their "ex," for the child's sake.

The statewide schedule of classes is posted at the OSU Parenting Web site so parents can enroll in classes to suit their needs. Some parents do not want to attend class with their ex-spouse, so they schedule to do so in another county. Some need to take a class soon because their court date is fast approaching. Others, such as grandparents, stepparents, clergy, judges, and attorneys, also attend the class. In one county a teenager enrolled her divorced parents because she thought they needed it.

We appreciate this opportunity to work with the court system to help Oklahoma parents learn ways to succeed as co-parents following divorce. This issue of *Focus* contains accounts from two associate district judges regarding the benefits of this Extension program.

– **Lynda Harriman**

Associate Dean/Assistant Director,
Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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- Enhancing the lives of children.



Enhancing the Lives of Children

From Associate District Judge Jacqueline Phelps Duncan, Custer County

The tear trembled at the corner of his eye and finally gathered enough weight to trace a line down 10-year-old Timmy's cheek while he talked. His younger brother, Pete, sat quietly next to him on the sofa in my chambers, watching and giving away his distress by the white knuckles on his small hands as he clasped them tightly in his lap. My office doors were closed to ensure our privacy while I listened to these two children whose parents had engaged in a daylong battle to convince me to appoint one of them as the "custodial" parent.

As parents and lawyers waited in the courtroom, I heard (in the language of children) the following from their sons: "We love our parents. We wish we all still lived together in our house. Is there something that could be done to fix all of this? We didn't cause this somehow, did we? We feel bad when Mommy says mean things about Daddy. We feel bad when

Daddy tells us to give Mommy a message that he can't come get us next weekend after all." I deduced from these children's messages that their parents were not parenting cooperatively and that they were not cognizant of the pain their children were in or why.

This experience and many more like it over the years caused me to endorse the development of classes on co-parenting in a divorce. There is no credible argument against the idea that Timmy, Pete, and other children of divorce deserve the best chances they can get to develop into loving, secure, responsible, and fulfilled adults. These classes help remind rational parents of just that.

In Custer County, where I serve, attendance for divorcing parents is mandatory before the final orders in the divorce are granted. Naturally, some divorcing parents attend this required class reluctantly, due to

time or money constraints or due to their belief that there is nothing they could hear or see that they do not already know. Happily, the feedback on many of the parents' evaluations after the class reveals that this "refresher" course on appropriate parenting in a new family structure has reminded them of their crucial roles as parents, protectors, and role models of their children.

Also, parents' statements to their lawyers and to me in the courtroom indicate a more conciliatory approach to parenting, which can only enhance the lives of their children. This approach often smoothes the way to settlement of all or part of the issues in a case. Settlement usually means issues between divorcing parents are resolved faster, cheaper, and happier, which again can only enhance the lives of their children. What greater goal can parents have? What better long-term service to the public can we participate in or support? ■

Parents Say the Program Makes a Difference

Extension Educators describe their experiences with the Co-Parenting through Divorce Program:

The evaluations are very, positive. Parents say they like to learn this information because it is important that they do right by their kids.

They like having the printed material in hand so they can refer to it later when they have questions.

Bev Brandon
Extension Educator, Beckham County

Two parents came up to me after class and said they were irritated they were required to take this class. They had felt they did not need it. After attending the class they realized they needed to know this information. They think every parent should be required to attend.

Ginny McCarthick
Extension Educator, Johnston County

Parents say the class makes them think of their child. But every situation is different. We cannot tell everyone exactly what to do and that is frustrating, but we can help him or her think about their child's age in relation to dealing with divorce. As an instructor, I have observed parents seek out other parents of children the same age and that's who I see them talking with during the breaks.

Radonna Sawatsky
Extension Educator, Custer County

When we first offered the class in February and March 1997, it was really newsworthy. Just about all of the newspapers and the AP interviewed me and at least one parent attending. Channels 5 and 25 came to the class and taped about an hour of the session and then interviewed a parent and me. It seems we are still newsworthy. Just recently in May, Channel 9 filmed an hour of the class and inter-

viewed a parent and me. Actually, that parent had an Emergency Protection Order (EPO) on her ex-spouse, who was stalking her that night. Sometimes our classes are very exciting.

The most common feedback I get from parents is that they think everyone should take this class. I think that is a good recommendation.

I get the most questions from parents of very young children. The parents are divorcing when the child is only two or three years old and they are concerned about how the child will experience the divorce at age 8, age 11 or 12. It is good that parents are thinking about their children developmentally. That is one of the main goals of the class: to have the parents focus on the child's needs at different ages.

Lisa Hamblin
Extension Educator, Oklahoma County

A Program with Tangible Results

From Associate District Judge Richard B. McClain, Garvin County



THROUGHOUT THE DIVORCE PROCESS, CHILDREN NEED:

- To be reassured that they are loved by and can express love for both parents.
- To know the divorce was a mutual decision.
- To receive comfort and support from friends and relatives.
- To be told that both Mom and Dad will be their parents forever.
- To understand that divorce is permanent.
- You to talk with them about the divorce and answer any questions they might have.

It is good to visit with you about one of my favorite subjects and what I believe to be a wonderful success story for your organization. Phillis Cothren, Extension educator, is conducting Co-Parenting through Divorce classes on two days every other month and it seems to be working out well for participants. She is most dedicated to this project, for which I am most appreciative, and it is reflected in both her manner of presentation and the results it achieves.

The traditional mode of settling legal controversies is the adversarial system, but such is totally inappropriate for domestic cases. All it does is create further animosity between the parties, with the result that the children suffer even more. Co-Parenting through Divorce classes cause the parties to look more at the children and less at themselves; thus less damage is done to the children.

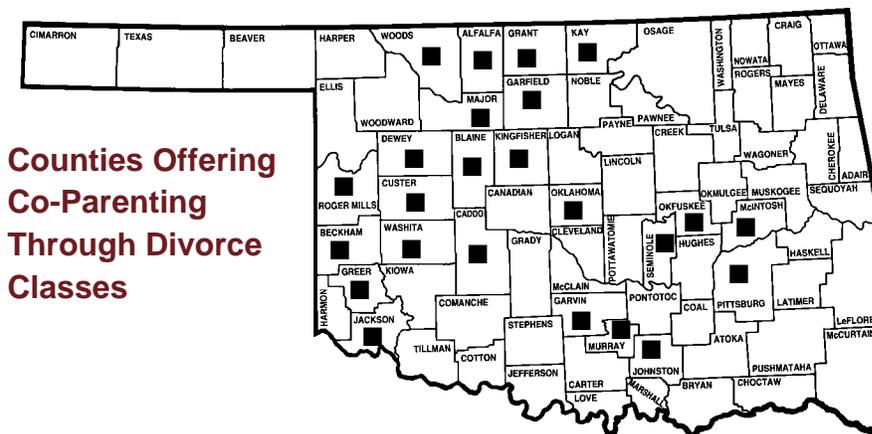
I know her Co-Parenting through Divorce classes and the way Phillis presents them are effective. I get feedback from both the attorneys and the participants to the effect that the course causes many of them to recognize the kids are also suffering and it's not the kids' fault. The parents need to work on making it as easy as possible for them and to shield them as much as possible.

I had a man stop me in the grocery store and thank me for sending him to the course

because of how it had changed his thinking. He had even read one of the reference books that Phillis recommends and told me to tell future participants that it was a good book. We can all be assured that the children of those divorced parents will be considerably better off because of that course.

“Co-Parenting through Divorce classes cause the parties to look more at the children and less at themselves; thus less damage is done to the children.”

I've had hotly contested cases that suddenly got considerably better and sometimes even were settled after the parties attended the course. Coincidence? In modification cases which occur long after the divorce, I have had parties state they wish they had attended the course back when they got their divorce because they have been doing the very things shown in the course in relation to their kids, which they shouldn't have. Now they are going to correct them. I could go on with other examples but won't in the interest of space. Suffice it to say, it is a program with tangible results. ■



Counties Offering Co-Parenting Through Divorce Classes

Collaboration Is the Key to Success

Collaboration is the key to helping families cope with divorce. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension is proud to work with dedicated professionals and agencies throughout the state. These include librarians who help parents find books

about divorce for their children and themselves. Early Settlement volunteers and the Alternate Dispute Resolution program help parents develop a personal plan for co-parenting. Counselors accept referrals and join our teaching teams.

Judges, attorneys, principals, teachers, clergy, and sometimes even the children themselves encourage parents to attend our classes so they can focus on their children's future. ■

Visit Our Web Sites:



for a schedule of classes throughout Oklahoma

www.okstate.edu/OSU_Ag/oces/parenting/

for our homepage and information on who we are and the programs we offer

www.okstate.edu/hes/fci

for fact sheets on-line

www.okstate.edu/OSU_Ag/agedcm4h/pearl/hes_pubs

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lynda Harriman".

Lynda Harriman,
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