

Children of divorce

Friend of the Court workshops help kids deal with 'emotional draining'

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Craig's parents told him they both wanted the divorce.

But when his mother moved him to a new home, the 9-year-old decided the breakup was all her idea. And he resented her for it.

Nobody knew his feelings, though, until the fourth-grader put them down on paper during a divorce workshop for kids sponsored by Oakland County Friend of the Court. His sketch showed Mommy stabbing Daddy, who was crying over the divorce.

"We talked a lot about what was going on, but didn't realize Craig blamed me," recalled the Troy mother. "It was something we really needed to deal with."

BRINGING OUT feelings about divorce is one goal of the Family Counseling Workshops the Oakland County

Circuit Court sponsors twice a year for families going through the process. The evening workshops meet in First United Methodist Church, Birmingham.

While parents discuss their legal, emotional and financial concerns with experts, youngsters do, too.

But instead of talking to attorneys and psychologists, they express their feelings to Friend of the Court counselors, judges and puppets.

"Divorce is very traumatic for children," explained Laura Czege-Barnard who heads the workshops with fellow Friend of the Court referee Martha D. Anderson.

"It's therapeutic for them to know they're not alone, to be with other kids going through exactly what they are."

STARTED TWO YEARS ago, Family Counseling Workshops were set up by the court as a public service to educate divorcing couples.

During six two-hour sessions, adults learn about finances, legal considerations, and how they and their children can adjust to their new lives.

"It may sound strange, but we want there to be an effect on a child when a parent leaves," explained clinical psychologist James Kors told 80 adults last week during a session on "How Divorce Affects Children."

Otherwise, it makes you wonder what kind of relationship they had. It's a loss, and when I lose someone it hurts."

"Divorce is so emotionally draining. It just totally envelops even people who aren't very emotional," explained Czege-Barnard, adding that the process brings out "the best and worst in people."

"We try to help them come through it as whole as possible."

WHEN THE WORKSHOPS began, there was just one session for teens and another for children 6-11. Because there were more questions than time, the program was expanded.

Now three of the six weekly sessions include children's programs. For older youths, there is a movie on divorce, discussion with counselors, and question and answer sessions with circuit court judges.

Younger children see skits and movies, and talk about their feelings with Friend of the Court counselors. They also meet a judge, who settles into an easy chair for an informal session designed to reduce their fears.

DURING SPRING session, Circuit Judges Fred M. Meier, Steven N. Andrews and Gene Schmelz explained terms like custody and support to the children.

Like the Friend of the Court participants, the judges volunteer their services for the workshops.

Involved with the program since it began, Andrews admits it's hard for youngsters to understand parents can stop loving each other, but still love their children.



With the help of bright yellow puppet, "Sunshine," Friend of the Court family counselor Mircha Colman talks about what it's like to go through a divorce.

DAVID FRANK/staff photographer

"As a general rule, both your parents love you and want what's best for you," the Bloomfield Hills resident told his young audience. "As a judge, I want what's best for you, too."

The judges urge youngsters to relax and be honest with them if they meet to discuss custody. Andrews suggests children take a "shopping list" of concerns with them into the judge's chambers.

"You know divorce is rather hard, not just on your parents but on you. And judges know that," he said.

"How many of you don't like divorce?" Andrews asked, with six of the 20 raising their hands.

"Judges don't like it either, but there's nothing we can do about it."

IN DISCUSSION groups, children talk about such issues as when parents should tell kids they're considering divorce.

"I think parents should tell children what to expect. Ours told us they were going to counseling and might get a divorce," said one teen.

Through hand puppets, younger children are encouraged by family counselors to "talk about the feelings you had when your parents told you about the divorce. Share them with your partner."

"A divorce makes you feel bad. A divorce is a separation that makes you mad," one boy told his puppet.

FRIEND OF THE COURT counselors, who wear baby blue and white T-shirts with "Friend" on the front, find even shy kids open up to the hand puppets and two large, fluffy ones called "Sunshine" and "Monkeyshine."

"They really relate to them," said Mircha Colman, the voice of

"Sunshine" who talks about the changes in his house after divorce. "It gives them an opportunity to express themselves and get their feelings out—to know they're not alone. That's the big thing."

PARTICIPANT Judy Draper attended the workshops because of her three children. And she's pleased that she did. "I've adjusted to the divorce, so it was more for them," said the South Lyon resident, whose children have talked with her about many issues raised in their group discussions.

"They've started communicating a lot better. I hate to see the workshop end." For a young divorced mother of an infant, the sessions offered a chance to meet others in the same situation.

"I found I'm not alone. It's just nice to have someone else to talk to."



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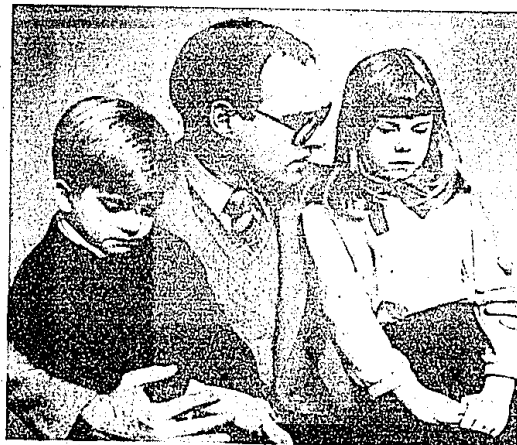
— Judge Steven Andrews

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