

Divorcing couple with kids helped by a Friend

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

In the heat of divorce, it's not easy for couples to sit down and talk coolly about their children's needs.

So last year, 106 Oakland County couples got some help from the Friend of the Court.

Meeting with a mediator, the estranged husbands and wives discussed such important issues as custody, child support, and visitation. More importantly, they got some pointers on how to work things out in the future.

"Parents know their children best and should have input into agreements affecting them. But sometimes they just can't talk to each other," said Lorraine Osthaus, Friend of the Court family counselor. "Often it's not that they disagree. They may agree, but they can't communicate."

THROUGH THE Friend of the Court Act of July 1, 1983, Michigan law provides that couples have the option of mediation before a county custody investigation or evaluation is undertaken.

The joint conferences with a mediator are voluntary, with both parties required to agree to the sessions. Of 6,500 divorces filed last year in Oakland County, only 106 couples requested help in dealing with their problems.

In 90 percent of county divorces, there is no dispute over custody or visitation.

The other 10 percent disagree, sometimes violently. Some formerly loving couples can't even be in the same room during or after the breakup.

ALONG WITH helping deadlocked couples communicate, Friend of the Court staffers help them realize it is normal to have problems dealing with each other when a marriage is ending.

"Nothing gives people training on how to handle a divorce situation," said Kim Bateman, chief assistant friend of the court.

"We assure them there's nothing wrong with them; that it's all right to dislike each other. But still, they need not beat up their children in the process."

FOR A FEW couples, divorce is an opportunity to punish each other. "They don't want to resolve the dispute," explained Bateman.

"It's taken a lot of energy to get to the attorney. They're going to beat the other person now."

"And it's unreasonable to expect people who've just made this emotional decision are going to turn around so easily."

With those who do want to resolve hanging issues, the mediator tries to get them to put their own feelings aside to benefit the children.

"The goal is to bring the child through the divorce as whole as possible," said Osthaus.

DEPENDENT ON how far apart spouses are, mediation can be one session or marathon meetings.

With the help of the mediator, couples explain their circumstances, define the issues they need to deal with, come up with alternatives for handling those problems, and if possible arrive at an agreement.

Children are usually not interviewed by the mediator, although they can be a part of the process.

In about 50 percent of Oakland cases, mediation is successful. But family counselors believe many are successful even when agreement isn't reached in the sessions.

"Often mediation fosters understanding of each other and the needs of their children," said Osthaus.

Her goal is to get parents to realize

two things: Children need exposure to both mother and father and should not be exposed to their parents' conflicts.

IN ORDER to make more couples aware the service is available, the Friend of the Court recently prepared a videotape on pre-divorce mediation of visitation and custody.

Filmed by the staff with Friend of the Court employees as actors, the video's goal is to show the public how the process works.

The tape was made in cooperation with the Family Support Council, made up of representatives from the Prosecutor's Office, Office of Child Support within the Department of Social Services. Bateman directed, produced, wrote and filmed the project.

"AS A SOCIETY we're not really programmed to mediate things. People are embarrassed about baring their feelings," explained Bateman.

"But there's no reason people should know how to deal with a divorce."

While it would increase their case loads, Friend of the Court family counselors agree they would rather help parents resolve their differences early.

"We see people falling into the same problems time after time. We're not that delighted at picking up the pieces," said Bateman. "They need intervention early."

Bateman would like to see ongoing mediation available to couples after divorce as well as before. Family counselors do some, but only on an informal basis.

"Sometimes people can't accept mediation until a couple years after the divorce. But all is not lost," Bateman said.

"And many times the situation changes, and it's necessary to go back and look at things again. Sometimes people need to meet on neutral ground to resolve their problems."

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Mothers Without Custody organize Oakland chapter

Mothers Without Custody is forming an Oakland County chapter, which will meet for the first time at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 13, in Oakland Family Services, 2351 12 Mile, Berkeley.

Planning to meet three times monthly, the national group is open to mothers going through the divorce process, involved in custody disputes, who have lost custody or are trying to regain custody of their children.

A counselor will be on hand for the group's support sessions the second and fourth Wednesdays in Oakland Family Services. General meetings with speakers will be the third Wednesday in 445 Albany, Ferndale. For membership information, call 545-2823 evenings or weekends.

Forum probes crime link

The link between illiteracy and crime will be explored in a daylong conference Saturday, Feb. 9, hosted by the National Forum for Educational Awareness in Somerset Inn, 2801 W. Big Beaver, Troy.

The program will run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. for \$15 (including lunch) or \$10 (registration only), according to NFEA spokesman Pauline Chenoweth of Harper Woods.

Topics and speakers will be "How Our Schools Contribute to Illiteracy, Crime," Samuel Blumenthal, author and teacher; "Criminals — a Profile," L. Brooks Patterson, Oakland County prosecutor; "A View from the Hill," Erica Kenney, Senate aide; and "Dick and Jane — Condemned to Life Imprisonment," Mike Brunner, National Institute of Education.



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