

Supporting Children when Parents Divorce or Separate: Family Living Programs Impact Report



About **40%** of all first marriages end in divorce.

The Challenge

Each year, more than 14,000 Wisconsin children experience their parents' divorce or separation. Families in transition can experience enormous amounts of stress resulting from separate living arrangements, increased financial burden, and new relationships. Exposure to parental stress and conflict is the single biggest factor affecting children as they transition from one household to two.

Problems brought on by parental disagreements can appear in different ways: decline in school performance, behavior problems, anxiety and depression. Even after a divorce or separation is over, the parents' relationship continues to affect their children. When parents argue in front of their children, or say bad things about the other parent, children suffer.

The good news is research has identified specific skills parents need to make their co-parenting relationship cooperative. Parents can smooth the transition by learning how divorce and separation affect children. By practicing ways to decrease conflict, parents can improve the chances that their children will thrive, despite temporary setbacks caused by divorce.

Wisconsin's family courts have the authority to order divorcing parents to complete up to four hours of co-parenting education. According to the law (1999 Wisconsin Act 9, 767.115), the courts may order classes that address what parents can do to make raising a child in a separated situation less stressful for the child.

The Solution

For the last two decades, UW-Extension's Family Living educators have been working with family court officials to provide education for divorcing or separating parents with minor children. The educators teach parents the skills to support themselves and their children through this time of change.

The educators help parents learn to prevent children from witnessing parental conflict, avoid putting children in the middle, improve communication and support the role of the other parent in the child's life. Educators also review the benefits and details of having a "parenting plan" including the need to review the plan as the children grow.

"Stay civil and get along. The kids are number one."

-Fond du Lac County parent

The Results

In the last year more than **1,700 parents in 24 Wisconsin counties** attended UW-Extension co-parenting programs. Parents indicate the classes are more useful than other sources of co-parenting information they have access to, including relatives and legal services.

Evaluations find that parents are learning the specific skills emphasized in the course, such as how to make decisions with the best interest of the children in mind, how to improve communication, and how to avoid putting children in the middle of parental disagreements.

Co-parenting education offers parents the skills to support their children while building healthy relationships with their children and encouraging positive relationships with the other parent.



Healthy relationships help children thrive.

93%

of the participants report that they **are less likely to argue with their child's other parent in front of their child as a result of class.**

91%

of the participants report that they **are more likely to cooperate with their child's other parent on parenting issues as a result of class.**

9 out of 10

Participants thought this class should be required for all divorcing or separating parents.

"At this class, I realized the importance of having their father take part more often in their lives so I'm more open to joint custody with more communication." *-Manitowoc County Parent*

"It has made me aware that I had to stop and take into consideration the effects my actions have on my child and to take a moment to figure out what is really best for the child." *-Columbia County parent*

For more information contact **your county UW-Extension Family Living Educator**
or visit <http://blogs.ces.uwex.edu/co-parenting/>