Parenting Apart Workshop Helps Parents Help Their Children Adjust to Divorce

The Situation
Over half of all American marriages end in divorce. Forty-five percent of children born to married couples may experience their parents’ divorce before turning 18. Child outcome in divorced and single parent families varies tremendously. Some families successfully provide their children with the support they need to weather the divorce. Other families are less successful and children end up engaging in risky behavior, showing extreme anger, or becoming withdrawn. Families in District III counties are no exception. Parents need help themselves to help their children through the divorce.

Our Response
The workshop developed by the University of Idaho and the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, “Parenting Apart” was selected for offering to separated and divorced parents. “Parenting Apart” is a three-session workshop written by Harriet Shaklee, University of Idaho Family Development Specialist, to help family members adjust to the changes of the divorce. The first lesson focuses on the effects of divorce on children. The second lesson presents mediation techniques for learning to work together to minimize the conflict for your children. The third lesson encourages participants to look ahead and plan for the future you want your kids to have.

The workshop was advertised in the Twin Falls Times-News, the Gooding County Leader, and through fliers distributed through the Extension Offices in Twin Falls, Cassia, Jerome, and Gooding Counties. A flier was also distributed to Health and Welfare offices, WIC offices, CSI, Center for New Directions, school district offices, post offices, libraries, and selected local bulletin boards.

Achievements
The young mother was near tears as she held up the flier and asked about the class. “My little boy says, ‘Why did you make Daddy go away?’ I don’t say anything, because I don’t know what to say. But when he’s in bed, I cry.” Parents who have taken Parenting Apart now know what to say. These are challenges faced by parents going through a divorce. It’s a new chapter in their lives, and they don’t have the tools. Parenting Apart gives them tools to know where to begin helping their kids through the divorce. Fourteen families participated in the workshops.

Comments by parents taking the workshop include: “I’m glad I decided to come. I feel better than when I walked in tonight.” “Last night I told my son the divorce wasn’t his fault. I didn’t think that was an issue, but because you told us in class, I decided to try it. To my surprise, his eyes opened wide and he said with astonishment, ‘It isn’t?’ so I guess it was on his mind.” A suggestion that another participant
found useful was letting her child pack the bag by himself for the transition to the other parent’s house. Another participant reported that the class helped motivate him to stay close to his grandchildren after the divorce, even though it was painful to share events with the ex-partner. Other class members reported using the mediation technique of giving up one thing, in order to get another. The most important principle learned by many was shielding the children from the parents’ conflict. It also was helpful to encourage children to express their feelings and help them learn to cope with those feelings.

The Future
The class will continue to be offered in Gooding, Jerome, and Twin Falls, and other counties in the District as participation grows. The class has been selected for co-sponsoring by the St. Benedicts Family Medical Center in Jerome as part of its Parenting Education program. Classes at the Health Education Center are regularly scheduled for September and January.

Because often at the end of class, participants like to linger and share their problems with others who understand, a divorce support group is being started.

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