

FOCUS

ON

Helping Divorcing Families

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University
Fall 2014

Dear friends and supporters of Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences:

Throughout 2014 Oklahoma Cooperative Extension has been celebrating 100 years of being an effective liaison between the general public and OSU researchers to develop and implement evidence-based educational materials. The mission of Family & Consumer Sciences, a division of Cooperative Extension, is to assist individuals, families, and communities in making informed decisions about their well being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life. An excellent example of this mission being carried out in Oklahoma is in a program titled: Co-Parenting for Resilience. As the name suggests, this program is designed to help divorcing parents work together in such a way that they reduce the impact of divorce on their children and enhance their ability to bounce back and adjust more rapidly. County Extension Educators have been delivering parenting and co-parenting education programs for over 20 years in the state of Oklahoma. As part of a larger system of Extension professionals, county level educators work in conjunction with researchers from OSU to develop best practice for the field and then regularly collect data to test and improve our programs as well as increase our understanding of co-parenting and the effects of divorce on children. This ensures our clients receive the best research-based educational curricula and resources to address the parenting issues that result from divorce.

In this month's Focus Newsletter we are highlighting the work that has been occurring around the issue of co-parenting because Oklahoma's governor recently signed into law House Bill 2249, effective November 1, 2014, requiring all divorcing couples (for reasons of incompatibility) with minor children to attend an educational program concerning the impact of divorce on children, as provided in subsection B of Section 107.2 of the bill title. The law also mandates a fee schedule to charge for this program. As you can imagine, already a plethora of out of state "programs" are targeting the people of Oklahoma, saying that they have been approved by the courts. Consumer beware!

If you are a legislator, attorney, or simply know of someone in need of a co-parenting program, please ensure that you are referring individuals to a legitimate, evidence-based program taught by trained and experienced educators who know the Oklahoma community. The article featured in this month's issue of FOCUS, authored by our Human Development and Marriage and Family Therapy specialists and county educators, describes the approach and depth of our *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program. It is not difficult to imagine that the *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service is the leading program in the state -meeting all requirements of the law and offering all Oklahoma residents "*Education You Can Trust.*"

Enjoy this article and do not hesitate to contact your local county extension office to learn more or to receive brochures with class dates and instructions on how to register. You can also visit our program webpage at: <http://coparenting.okstate.edu/>



Jorge Atilas
Associate Dean
Extension and Engagement, Human Sciences



In This Issue –

- **Co-Parenting for Resilience: Helping Parents Help Their Children**
- **What to look for in a co-parenting course for divorced or divorcing parents**
- **Education you can trust: Co-Parenting for Resilience**

Co-Parenting for Resilience: Helping Children Overcome the Challenges of Divorce

Approximately one million children experience their parent's divorce every year in the United States. Additionally, some estimates indicate that 40 percent of children born today will have divorced parents by the time they are 16 years old. While most children eventually overcome the impact of divorce, 25 percent go on to have major long-term mental health and behavioral problems. Even among those who adjust well, many experience considerable sadness, anger, and emotional pain that is implicated in negative child outcomes such as antisocial behavior, delinquency, depression, suicide, school dropout, substance use and precocious sexual activity. Moreover, the effects of divorce can last into adulthood. Adult children of divorce have been shown to have increased difficulty in establishing intimate and lasting relationships and are at greater risk for divorce themselves when they do.

Much of the negative impact of divorce on children's adjustment can be lessened by changing how their parents interact with one another, and by improving the basic parenting practices of divorcing mothers and fathers. A growing body of research surrounding the benefits of parental educational classes for divorcing parents shows promising results. Research suggests that educating parents about the impact of divorce on children's adjustment; reducing children's exposure to parental conflict; improving parental communication and how parents work together to benefit their children; increasing the involvement of the non-custodial parent, and pointing parents toward mediation instead of expensive litigation are all important strategies that improve the adjustment children have to their parent's divorce.

More and more, states are adopting these statutes in hopes of mitigating the negative effects many children experience as a result of their parents' divorce. In 2014, Oklahoma joined the ranks of 27 other states by requiring parent education courses through a state stat-

ute. The new law requires divorcing parents of a minor child to attend an educational program designed to reduce the impact of divorce on children. Although the law is new as of 2014, judges in almost half of Oklahoma's 77 counties have been ordering parents to attend a parenting class before the divorce is final for more than 20 years.

What to look for in a co-parenting course for divorced or divorcing parents

The Oklahoma law lays out basic guidelines for what the parenting courses in Oklahoma must teach in order to be accepted by the courts. These guidelines include:

1. Short-term and longitudinal effects of divorce on child well-being;
2. Reconciliation as an optional outcome;
3. Effects of family violence;
4. Potential child behaviors and emotional states during and after divorce including information on how to respond to the child's needs;
5. Communication strategies to reduce conflict and facilitate cooperative co-parenting;
6. Area resources, including but not limited to, nonprofit organizations or religious entities available to address issues of substance abuse or other addictions, family violence, behavioral health, individual and couples counseling, and financial planning.

Because the marketplace offers many classes that claim to meet these guidelines and satisfy the requirements of the law, it is important for judges and lawyers to know what to look for when referring someone to a class. Three basic indicators that can help

parents, lawyers and judges decide if a class is appropriate are: transparency, credibility and effectiveness.

- *Transparency.* Reputable programs will clearly state or have easily accessible information about what the class covers. If you cannot easily find what the program covers, you might want to look for a different program.
- *Credibility.* Does the program name the author (is anyone putting their name behind the program), or does a respected organization sponsor the program? Is there an address or phone number to contact? Are the individuals teaching the class qualified to do so? If the answer to any of these is "no," then you are probably not dealing with a program that meets the requirements of the law.
- *Effectiveness.* Has this program been shown to produce results? Although many programs will provide quotes from "satisfied customers," it is important to dig a little deeper and look for evaluation studies that use scientific methods to assess whether the class really helps parents or not. If a program does not supply this information, it's probably not a good choice.

In addition to the above points, it is also important for co-parenting classes to include information on situations in which encouraging parents to work together may not be an appropriate goal for parent education. For example, families in which ongoing domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and addiction, and criminal behavior are present are special cases that may put children and the custodial parent at increased risk for harm. Classes that do not address these high-risk circumstances and appropriately inform parents of existing resources to address these situations should be avoided.

Education you can trust: *Co-Parenting for Resilience*

The OSU Cooperative Extension Service has been delivering quality and effective divorce education programming for more than 20 years, and is currently offering the *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program throughout the state of Oklahoma. The *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program is a 3- to 4-hour program designed to equip divorcing parents with valuable strategies and skills that will support their children in overcoming the negative effects of divorce. This research-based program was developed by faculty members from the College of Human Sciences at Oklahoma State University who specialize in parenting, marriage and family, mental health, and other related areas. The lead developers of the program are Drs. Ron Cox and Matt Brosi. In addition, highly qualified educators who hold Bachelor's or Master's degrees in Human Sciences disciplines and are specially trained to work with divorcing parents deliver the classes through the OSU Cooperative Extension County offices across the state. Extension Educators in local county offices work closely with judges, lawyers, and other state agencies such as the Department of Human Services to coordinate services within their communities.

Although educational in nature, the *Co-Parenting for Resilience* course is based on techniques and strategies developed from proven models of behavior change, and incorporates the latest research from fields such as child development, stress and coping, conflict resolution, interpersonal relations, and divorce and remarriage. The class begins by raising parental awareness of how divorce affects the parenting process, and thus, their children. Then, it points parents to effective parenting practices, while simultaneously leading them through activities that change their perception of the challenges presented by the divorce and their attempted solutions. The program guides parents through a series of exercises, videos, and vignettes that allows them to apply what they've learned in "real life" scenarios. Finally, armed with the ability to recognize the difference between effective and ineffective parenting practices, the

program invites parents to commit to implementing parenting behaviors that are better aligned with their goals for their children.

In addition to a curriculum that is based on current research and theory from the social sciences, the *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program is continuously undergoing rigorous evaluation. Initial evidence from these evaluations demonstrates the program's ability to raise parental awareness of the impact of divorce on children and motivate parents to change their behavior. As a result of these rigorous evaluations, researchers at OSU and beyond will be able to continually glean new insights into what works, for whom, and under what conditions. In turn, these advances will allow practitioners to continually develop and define best practice in the field and to ensure that parents and children in Oklahoma receive an ethical and evidence-based program that promotes the positive behavior change and child well-being that leads to a healthier life. Although many parents are reluctant, at first, to take a parent education course, most finish the course very appreciative for the information and training that they received. Participants in the *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program have had many positive things to say, below are a few examples.

Here's what two mothers said after the class:

"I needed this class to help me learn how to deal with my children and how their feelings matter and how this divorce has affected them. Thanks for teaching a program like this."

"This program has helped me a lot more that you will ever know. I needed to realize what my kids were going through and how to help them. It isn't just about me. I hope I can be a much better parent to them and help to build the relationship with their co-parent."

Two dads said:

"This program taught me how important it is to communicate with my co-parent and how important

both of us are in our children's lives."

"The most important thing I learned was to really pay attention to what I say and how I act in front of my kids. I need to do a better job of managing my anger and stress."

Conclusion

Divorce has become ubiquitous in American society affecting nearly half of the population. Research has shown that divorce can have lasting negative effects on children if mismanaged by the divorcing parents. As Oklahoma moves toward reducing these negative effects by requiring divorcing parents with a minor child to attend an educational class, it is essential that parents, judges and lawyers be informed about what constitutes best practice. The *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program fulfills all of the requirements laid out in the new Oklahoma law, and has been the program of choice for numerous judges and lawyers during the past 20 years. For more information on the *Co-Parenting for Resilience* program, visit: www.coparenting.okstate.edu.

FOCUS is a publication designed to direct attention to innovative Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programs and to share program philosophy and updates of new and changing program directions. Your comments and suggestions for topics for future issues are welcomed and appreciated. Please send all correspondence to FOCUS, Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension, 135 Human Sciences, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078. FOCUS is published three times yearly by the Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension program.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of \$285.00 for 500 copies. 1014 GH.

For more information about this and other Family and Consumer Sciences programs, visit our website at: <http://fcs.okstate.edu>

Cooperative Extension-Family Consumer Sciences
135 Human Sciences
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078-6111

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED