

Extension's Parents Forever program teaches divorcing parents how to put their children front and center, instead of in the middle.



Leading field research shows that young people who experience family disruption are more likely than their peers to have emotional problems and low academic achievement; conceive a child in their teens; and get into trouble with the law. Fortunately, divorce education programs like Parents Forever can help deter these negative consequences.

Parents Forever: Helping children through the process of divorce



Judge Paul Rasmussen of Minnesota's 9th Judicial District is one of many advocates of Extension's Parents Forever program, which gives parents skills to minimize the stress of divorce for themselves and their children.

As a result of high divorce rates, nearly 10 percent of all minors live with one parent, and fewer than half of today's children can expect to live continuously with their biological parents during childhood. That's why Minnesota and several other states now require parenting education for divorcing parents with children under age 18.

Every day, Paul Rasmussen, a judge in Minnesota's 9th Judicial District, sees how distressing divorce can be for kids. "Some parents undermine the child's relationship with the other parent by placing the child in the middle of the dispute, using the child as a spy or a messenger, or degrading the other parent in front of the child," Rasmussen said.

Rasmussen is one of many supporters of Extension's Parents Forever program because

it gives parents skills to minimize stress for themselves and their children. "The program reminds parents that their role as co-parents continues throughout the life of their child and provides them with strategies to help ensure that the needs of their children are met."

Since its inception in 1997, Parents Forever has reached an estimated 20,000 parents. Currently available in 65 counties across the state and in two languages, the program is based on the latest research and designed and tested by educators at the University of Minnesota.

A 12-hour program guides parents through "The Impact of Divorce on Adults," "The Impact of Divorce on Children," "Money Issues in Divorce," "Legal Issues in Divorce" and "Pathways to a New Life."

Though most divorcing parents attend separately, the classes typically draw a balance of men and women, which helps broaden perspectives.

In addition to parent education, the program also features a “train-the-trainer” component. In Minnesota alone, Extension has trained about 700 professionals from the public health sector, school districts, private agencies and a variety of other community institutions to deliver content that engages participants and fits their individual situations.

Extension program leader Minnell Tralle, who has led the Parents Forever team since 1998, is always amazed by the dedication of



A “train-the-trainer” component allows professionals like Jan Higgins to teach Extension’s divorce education programs in their communities.

communities to the program. “Many people are trained as trainers and do this without getting paid. It’s evening and weekend work for the most part—but they get involved and they stick with it,” she said. “This is important work that has the potential to really help families. I think that’s why the communities believe in it so strongly.”

Alongside her role as executive director of the Friends Against Abuse program, Jan Higgins has delivered Parents Forever in Koochiching County since 2001. The program works, she believes, because parents can quickly identify with the information presented. “A lot of parents come in with the attitude of ‘I’m just sitting here to do my time,’ but then they find it really useful and they’re glad they attended.”

Recent evaluation data supports the program’s success. After participating in Parents Forever, 75 percent of attendees reported they had reduced conflict with the other parent in front of the kids, and 66 percent said they cooperated better with the other parent about their children.

“It’s changed me,” said one participant. “It’s taken the focus more off of me and put it on, ‘Where do my kids fall into play here?’” Now that’s a lesson every parent should learn.

For more information, see Parents Forever at www.extension.umn.edu/ParentsForever

Creating a parenting plan with tools from Extension

In Minnesota, divorcing and never-married parents can create parenting plans as part of their legal agreement for the care of their children. *We Agree* facilitates this process.

The 52-page booklet gives parents the tools to make mutual decisions that meet the needs of their children as they parent apart.

Who has the child during the holidays? How should we handle disciplining our child? These are just a few of the questions that divorced, separated or never-married parents need to ask. *We Agree* can help them work together to find the right answers.

For more information, click on “We Agree” under Parents Forever at www.parenting.umn.edu



Family All Ways: New curriculum speaks to children of divorce

Adults aren’t the only ones who can benefit from divorce education. Children need positive tools to deal with family transitions as well. That’s the idea behind *Family All Ways*, a youth divorce education curriculum geared toward 11- to 14-year-olds. Currently in development by University of Minnesota Extension and North Dakota State University Extension, the project evolved through interviews with youth, parents, professionals and practitioners to determine the educational needs of children related to divorce. “Middle school is an area with the greatest gaps,” said Ellie McCann, an Extension educator and the *Family All Ways* team leader and curriculum author. “This strength-based curriculum will help an age group that is already dealing with adolescence



and a new school experience, better deal with the transitions required by family change.” Following a series of pilot programs, *Family All Ways* is expected to launch statewide in spring 2008.