



Idaho Parents Learn How to Help Their Children Cope with Divorce

Cheryl Hart remembers when she was a divorced mom with a young son. “My ex-husband and I didn’t have a model for parenting after divorce and we didn’t think through very well some of the things that we did.” For example, Hart would pass messages to her former spouse through her son rather than speaking with her “ex” directly.

Now Hart, family court services coordinator for the Fifth Judicial District, presents a three-part curriculum called “Parenting Apart” to divorcing parents in southcentral Idaho. With three other individuals, she has delivered the class to more than 800 clients, who are required to attend if they are filing for divorce, modifying a previous parenting agreement, or seeking visitation as unmarried dads.

“They come in cranky because they’ve been ordered to attend, but I am continually amazed at the positive response by the end of the class,” Hart says.

The curriculum was written by Harriet Shaklee, University of Idaho Extension family development specialist, with funding from both the UI and the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. More than 200 copies have been distributed to interested trainers working with courts, schools, and other organizations.

Shaklee was motivated by studies indicating that, six years after their parents’ divorce, more than 20 percent of children are still struggling with social, emotional, and academic problems. That compares with 10 percent of children in married families. “There are risk factors out there for youth, no matter what, but divorce doubles them,” she says—and it’s conflict between parents that does the most damage.



Photo by Bruce Shields

Julia Kinsey, a graduate of UI Extension educator Diana Christensen’s “Parenting Apart” class, hikes with daughter Amanda in the Snake River Canyon near Jerome. Kinsey says the class showed her how to provide “a wonderful family environment” after divorce.

“Parenting is hard even on a good day,” says Becky Dahl, retired UI Extension educator in Bannock County who has also taught the course. Caught between battling parents, kids can learn that the only way to avoid unleashing their parents’ anger is to lie. “They begin dreading to visit a parent because they’ll be grilled or cross-examined when they get back: Does Dad have a girlfriend? Did he feed you? Did you stay up late? Is the house clean? How is my child support being used?”

“Parenting Apart” provides a research-based model for parenting cooperatively despite separation and divorce. According to Shaklee, studies find that children adjust well to divorce in many families. These same studies “can show us what parents in those families do to ease the transitions for their children.”

“I learned that it was possible for two families to work together and raise an emotionally healthy child.” -Julia Kinsey

The curriculum emphasizes the importance of encouraging children to share their feelings about the divorce and shielding them from adult disagreements. Gooding County Extension educator Diana Christensen, another “Parenting Apart” teacher, says it “helps parents see things differently and therefore do things differently. They’re able to see beyond their own hurt feelings to the effects of the divorce on their children.”

In addition, “Parenting Apart” helps parents build mediation skills and shows them how to approach each other as business partners—not sparring partners. “You don’t have to like someone to work with them,” says Shaklee. “You have a task, you have a goal—you both care about raising the children.”

Shaklee hopes “Parenting Apart” also encourages noncustodial parents to stay involved in their children’s lives. “If we can help families find ways to keep both parents productively involved, then parents and children will benefit.”

