

## **Program Impact Report: Parenting Education Helps Children through Divorce**

1. County: Richland
2. Impact Area: Human
3. Division: Continuing Education, Cooperative Extension
4. UW Institution(s): UW-Richland
5. Program Keyword: Family and Consumer Education

## Program Impact Report – SAMPLE

### Parenting Education helps children through divorce

**Impact Summary:** Divorce can be a stressful time, especially for children. UW-Richland Continuing Education, the County Circuit Court, Social Services and Cooperative Extension have worked as partners to deliver a course for divorcing parents. Participants learn new skills and behaviors resulting in less stress, better communication and family relationships and fewer ongoing court appearances, which also saves the county money.

**Situation:** Children of divorce face many challenges and stresses that are often unrecognized by their parents. Parents are often too engrossed in their own emotional needs to address the needs of their children during a divorce. Other children become victims of bitter contention between their mother and father. Because of these difficulties, the Richland County Circuit Court System mandates that parents in the process of divorcing attend a course on how to deal with their children during and after the divorce procedures.

#### Response

**Inputs:** The Richland County Circuit Court and the Richland County Social Services provided an \$800 grant to the UW-Richland Office of Continuing Education to develop a course for divorcing parents. In cooperation with the UW-Extension family living agent in Richland County and therapists from a private mental health organization, UW-Richland designed and organized a six-hour course on the stressors associated with divorce, child development as it relates to divorce, family reorganization and cooperative parenting. The course is offered three times a year over two consecutive Saturday mornings.

**Outputs:** UW-Richland Continuing Education has offered 12 courses since 1998, with 141 participants completing the course. The parents range in age from 17 to 49 years old and have an average of two to three children under the age of 18. Approximately 60 percent reported they were low income. Eight participants received county waivers for the \$40/person fee to attend the mandated course. The Richland County transportation union considers the course a high priority and sponsored several participants.

Course coordinators recommend that couples do not attend the class together. Couples find it difficult to ask pertinent questions in front of their divorcing partner, even if it is an amicable divorce.

#### Outcomes:

An evaluation at the end of each course allows parents to report changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviors as a result of attending the course. Of the topics covered, parents reported that they learned the most and made more behavior changes in stress reduction, establishing guidelines for visitation and using positive communications. Based on 97 responses, 28 parents (29 percent) learned more about using positive

activities to reduce stress and another 20 parents (21 percent) plan to use stress reduction activities. Six parents had already used the activities to reduce stress as a result of attending the course. Twenty-four percent reported that they were learning more about establishing and discussing visitation guidelines; another 21 percent plan to do so and four percent had already done so as a result of the course. Forty-two percent (23 parents) reported that they learned more about using positive communication skills with the other parent; 46 percent reported their intention to change these behaviors and 8 percent (8 parents) had already made changes in their communication patterns as a result of the course. Course instructors used evaluation results to modify course content, placing more emphasis on communication skills and visitation issues.

Cooperative Extension works with the Richland County (Child) Support Administrator to track how this course impacts custody disputes, post-divorce litigation and child support compliance. They compared the court records of parents who attended the course the first year with those who were divorced prior to 1998. They found that parents who attended the course spent less time in the court system and experienced less conflict with their former spouse than those who did not attend. Both fathers and mothers had fewer cases of post-divorce litigation and were less delinquent in paying child support. In addition, mothers were involved in fewer child custody disputes.

These differences indicate that the knowledge and skills gained in the course help parents develop positive, cooperative behaviors. These, in turn, help lower children's stress and enable them to adjust more easily to household transitions, communicate more positively and form better relationships with both parents. The public gains, too. The county has fewer court expenses when parents pay child support on time and avoid using the courts to mediate post-divorce disputes.

**Success Story:** One father said he had new respect for the parents of his ex-wife wanting to communicate and have a relationship with their grandchildren. He had previously not understood the needs of his children and their need to keep in contact with people from their past. As a result, he is helping his children rebuild relationships and stay involved with their grandparents.

A mother said divorced parents could use an annual refresher course to keep them on track, as divorce is a continual challenge. New issues come up frequently that she felt could be well addressed through ongoing support and education.

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