

Parents Forever/Kids Talk About Divorce

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Parents Forever is a parenting program for adults who are divorcing. The educational program was developed by the University of Minnesota Cooperative Extension and has had 10 years of exceptional success. The program was adapted for Nebraska in 1999.

LB 777 provided judges the opportunity to require parents to attend a parenting class. **Parents Forever** was developed with those basic parenting concepts in mind, with a vision that real behavior change could take place with time and practical application.

Parents Forever began in the 10th Judicial District with a grant from the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. Sites were developed in Hastings and Holdrege to accommodate participants' transportation and child care needs. By 2006, more than 3,300 adults across the district received certificates of completion from **Parents Forever**. **Parents Forever** is currently a fee based program, with each parent paying the fee.

Parents Forever:

- Focuses on the needs of children during and after divorce.
- Teaches parenting styles.
- Explains ways to identify feelings.
- Identifies the grief cycle through the eyes of a child.
- Improves communication skills.
- Teaches how to identify the reason for children's behaviors.
- Teaches both parents how to parent cooperatively from two homes.
- Provides an opportunity to build a network with parents in similar situations.

The following responses show that behaviors do change after six hours with **Parents Forever**.

Judges report decreased numbers of parents coming back to court for "anger" issues and custody modifications.

Attorneys report that classes seem to cut down on the time they need to spend in mediation. **Mediators concentrate** on mediating issues — not teaching parenting and communication skills.

Kids like it because their parents focus on them and keep them out of the middle.

Participants say classes help them:

- Listen to their children.
- Identify feelings.
- Avoid putting children in the middle.
- Use "I" messages to communicate.
- Recognize behavior triggers.
- Talk respectfully to the other parent.
- Avoid the manipulation trap.

Ninety-eight percent of adults report in evaluations that Parents Forever has been beneficial. Comments from these evaluations include:

"If I had taken this class before, I wouldn't be divorced."

"I was mad that I had to take the class, but I learned a lot and my kids will benefit."

"Every parent should take this class!"

"Their [Dad/Mom] and I have learned not to fight in front of the kids."

"At the time I took the class, I thought I knew everything. A year later, I was very glad we had talked about all the possibilities so I could help my children through a very difficult situation." "This class and the instructors are great supporters of children and all kinds of families."

Bill of Rights for Children in Divorce Action is a 19-item document that states the rights of children of divorce. For example: "The right and freedom to receive love from and express love for both parents." "The right to visit both sets of grandparents." "The right to not carry messages from one parent to another." "The right to have parents talk to each other about how I am doing." "The right to celebrate birthdays and holidays with both parents."

These rights are often lost to children during the bitterness of divorce. **Parents Forever** reminds parents of the rights and responsibilities for children and provides skills for parents so they can open discussion on these issues.

Kids Talk About Divorce is an educational program for children who are experiencing divorce and its aftermath. A maximum of six hours of classes are offered at the same time as **Parents Forever** to maximize the opportunity for interaction between children and their parent(s). Parents meet in one room and children in another with time for interaction.

Kids Talk About Divorce is in the third year of funding from a Juvenile Services Grant from the Nebraska Crime Commission. The 2002 grant provides an opportunity for families in 40 counties to be educated on the effects of divorce on children. Thirteen education sites are located within Judicial Districts 1,5,6,7,8, and 10. More than 800 children have completed classes as of December 2002.

The Nebraska Crime Commission believes in the value of this educational program. The numbers of youth in juvenile courts have a strong correlation to the number of children from divorced and single-parent homes. Early intervention in the life of a child of divorce may change that correlation.

Through ***Kids Talk About Divorce***, kids learn:

- Divorce is not my fault!
- I have a right to love both parents.
- Parents divorce each other, not their kids.
- Identifying my feelings can help me cope with anger and sadness.
- I can use the grief cycle to understand why I'm stuck in my feelings about divorce.
- "I" messages tell parents how I'm feeling and what I think would help.
- Parents really can listen!
- Respect, responsibility, rights and rewards are all related.
- Many caring adults are there to listen.
- I can express feelings in an acceptable manner.
- There are other kids experiencing the same things.
- I am not alone!

Evaluations indicate:

- Parents say kids seem happier, less apprehensive about the divorcing process.
- Kids learn to use the "I" message and teach their parents how it works!
- Kids learn how to stay out of the middle of their parents fights.

- Kids feel free to love both parents.
- Kids often ask if they can take the class again. (*The answer is yes!*)

Kids Talk About Divorce is best taught in a team situation. Team members may be teachers, counselors, ministers, experienced parents, or young adults who have grown up with an understanding of divorce.

The team allows for children to work in large group and small group activities, divided by ages or levels of understanding.

Stories, activities, board games, and crafts are the method used for education and discussion of divorce and coping concepts. Skills are learned through practical application, role-play and one-on-one interactions with their parent.

Children arrive frequently using the words "Divorce Sucks!" when asked how they feel.

They still may feel that way when they receive their completion certificate; however, they have accomplished several cognitive and behavioral changes that will help them not only survive, but thrive through divorce with the help of both parents and other loving adults.

Parents are the first, best, and most important teachers, but instructors at *Kids Talk About Divorce* run a close race in the other significant adult category!

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