

# Supporting the Changing Family

Miriam S. Leatherman, WVU Extension Agent, Hardy County  
Margaret W. Miltenberger, WVU Extension Agent, Mineral County

## Program Purpose

Participants will understand:

- the development assets, which help youths become happy, healthy, and productive adults.
- the stages of divorce for parents.
- the stages of divorce for the children involved.
- appropriate methods of meeting development asset needs for children of divorce.

## Teaching Outline for the Leader

1. Select an interactive introduction activity.
2. Build on activity to introduce the topic.
3. Describe the divorce process experience for children and their parents.
4. Describe the eight development assets for children.
5. Select an interactive group activity.

## Interactive Introduction

Group activities can help capture the interest of the group about the topic. These are “energizers” from *Energizers and Icebreakers* by Elizabeth Foster, 1998.

### The Human Knot

1. Participants stand shoulder-to-shoulder in a circle, placing both hands in the center.
2. When the leader says “start,” everyone grabs the hands of a person who is not on the immediate right or left.
3. Once everyone is connected, the object is to untangle the knot, without releasing hands.
4. One pair releases their grip.
5. Try to form a straight line.

### Teaching points:

*Like the activity, divorce is complex. More people are involved than just the divorcing parents and their children. A variety of methods can be used to approach most of life’s challenges. The lesson will help us focus on the children and not become lost in the confusion.*

### Puzzling Puzzles

You will need duplicates of pattern puzzle pictures or purchased cardboard puzzles.

1. Put puzzle pieces in four or five different envelopes per group. Each group receives one puzzle and an envelope of pieces. Before giving the puzzle packages to the groups, remove one piece from each puzzle and place in a different group’s envelope.
2. Pass out the envelopes of puzzle pieces.
3. Instruct the groups to wait for the signal to begin. Ask tell them to cooperate and put the puzzles together. The winning group receives a surprise or token.
4. Once the signal is given, participants begin to put the puzzle together. As participants begin notice that a piece is missing or doesn’t belong, they will begin to ask the leader what to do: Where is their piece?
5. Walk around observing participants putting the pieces together. Do not attempt to answer the questions.
6. Groups will likely look for the missing piece, discovering that another group has the necessary piece. The first to put its puzzle together wins.

### Teaching points:

*Divorce is a complex life event. It will be frustrating at times when the family feels they are missing pieces. As with many life challenges, all the pieces are not present at one time and we often have to look “outside of the envelope.”*

## **Background— Families and Divorce Today**

Few families today are exempt from divorce. Couples marrying today face a 50-50 probability of divorcing. This means if a family has two children, it is likely that one of them will experience divorce. Families are not alone in the stressful process.

Divorce is an ongoing process rather than an event that ends with a court decree. Each divorce is different, and every parent and child experience different emotions and challenges. Those surrounding the family are very much involved. Grandparents, child-care providers, teachers, coaches, youth leaders, etc., all feel the loss and concern in the process of establishing new family structures.

The child's experience can be overwhelming at times. The good news is that by supporting key development assets we can enable children to lead healthy, productive lives. Children have the best chances for a positive outcome when family members, adult caregivers, and friends keep the child's best interest foremost.

Divorce is not the end of family but a transition to a new form of family. The business of reorganizing the family is difficult. It is a process, and time sheds different light on relationships. Understanding the process and focusing on development assets can help us support children experiencing divorce.

## **Family and Friends— Where Do We Fit In?**

Family members and friends can be critical in helping children through the divorce process and enabling their developmental assets. Research shows that children can grow into healthy, caring adults as long as they have a caring relationship with at least one adult parent or adult parent-substitute. All children benefit from the stability of whatever family relationship is established.

Divorcing parents' extended family can be part of the solution in family restructuring. They can provide stability and continuity in times of change: emotional support to the child, emergency or ongoing child care, and parent substitute.

### **Caution**

This is a balancing act for extended family members and friends. Your help and support are very important, but be careful not to overstep boundaries. Listening to

both the child and the parent will enable you to learn where your help is needed most.

## **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren**

The 2000 Census revealed a 50 percent increase in the number of grandparents providing full custodial care of children. This study topic is limited in addressing this issue. Please refer to the resource list for more information.

## **A Parent Is Forever**

Research shows that children need contact with both parents for balanced development. It is psychologically harmful to children to be deprived of a healthy relationship with one parent. To have to choose between parents is damaging to the child. If the end result is exclusion of a parent from the child's life, the injury is irreparable.

Maintaining a child's connection with both parents is extremely important, unless there is an abusive situation. Parental conflict can devastate children. Extended family members and friends must encourage the children's relationship and contact, regardless of their own feelings about a parent they blame. A relationship with both parents is essential to the child's well-being.

## **Pitfalls—Slowing the Healing Process for Children**

Some actions by family members and friends can slow the healing process needed for a child to accept the divorce and develop personal assets:

- arguing with a parent in front of children,
- sending messages through the children,
- pumping the children for information about either parent or stepparents,
- asking the children to keep a secret from either parent,
- criticizing a parent or other extended family in front of the children, and
- using visitation and money issues to harm the child's relationship with either parent and other extended family.

## **Children First . . .**

Parents need to communicate in simple terms as soon as possible that there is going to be a separation or divorce. Children need to hear that their basic needs will be met, that the relationship will continue

with both parents, and that much will remain the same. Parents must do these things, but family members can help with the following:

- listen to the children,
- help maintain a stable routine,
- support both parents,
- advocate for continued contact with relatives on both sides of the family,
- respect confidentiality,
- apply hug therapy when appropriate, and
- recognize when to encourage both children and adults to seek professional help if it appears they are unable to cope.

## Understanding the Process Children Experience

The process of divorce and rebuilding family involves many stages for a child. Although most experience these stages, all children are different. Some may struggle more with a certain stage. Please see the resource list for topics that describe common behaviors and development tasks for children of different ages. Often the hardest task for children is dealing with the loss—overcoming feelings of rejection, self-blame, and vulnerability. Typical stages include:

- understanding the reality of divorce,
- understanding it is not their fault,
- strategically withdrawing,
- dealing with loss,
- dealing with anger,
- working out guilt,
- accepting the permanence of divorce, and
- taking a chance on love as they become adolescents and adults.

## Understanding the Process Parents Experience

Family members experience a variety of emotions about both parents. The focus of this topic is the child; however, understanding the stages the parents experience can enable us to better support the child. The process will vary, but it typically includes:

- ending the marriage,
- experiencing shock and denial,
- being angry,

- feeling depressed and detached,
- bargaining,
- mourning the loss,
- accepting the divorce,
- resolving or containing passions especially anger,
- reclaiming oneself,
- venturing forth again, and
- rebuilding his or her life.

## How Family and Friends Can Help

The Search Institute (Minneapolis, 1999) has organized “development assets,” which are essential building blocks for the foundation of growing children. Support by extended families and other adults is important during major life transitions such as divorce. Understanding and focusing on these development assets can help bring a positive approach to the divorce experience for children.

The 40 assets are organized into eight general categories as follows:

- 1. Support them with love, care, and attention.**
- 2. Empower children with opportunities to make a difference in their family and community.**
- 3. Establish clear boundaries and have high expectations.**
- 4. Help them find activities that make constructive use of their time.**
- 5. Nurture in them a commitment to learning.**
- 6. Instill positive values to guide them.**
- 7. Help children develop life skills and social competencies.**
- 8. Nurture, celebrate, and affirm children’s positive identity.**

A variety of practical ways used to support and strengthen children living in divorce transitions coincide with the Search Institute’s development assets, which are beneficial to all children.

## Interactive Teaching Activities

### Group Discussion

- Discuss how individuals can support a child’s development assets.
- Give examples of things you have done or observed others doing with children that support strengthening the child.

## Creative Art Activities

Talking about divorce or any emotional topic can be difficult for a child. Creating art or writing allows a child to express and process feelings in healthy ways. Encouraging writing or starting a journal may be especially effective with teenagers.

- Ask participants to paint or draw a picture that describes how they are feeling today. (You are strongly encouraged to try paint; for some reason, the free-flowing fluid paint feels very expressive. Yes, it is messy, but manageable.)
- Ask participants to write a paragraph about a challenge they are facing.
- Relate either activity to how expressing your feelings could benefit a child.

## Recommended Resources

### Children's Books

*It's Not Your Fault KoKo Bear*, by Vicky Lansky (1998)  
Book Peddlers.

*Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families*,  
by Laurene Krasney Brown and Marc Brown (1986)  
Little Brown Company.

*How Do I Feel About: My Parents' Divorce*, by Julia Cole  
(1997) Copper Beach Books.

*Pre-Teen Pressures: Divorce*, by Debra Goldentyer (1998)  
Steck-Vaughn Company.

*The Kid's Guide to Divorce*, for preteens and teens by Brogan  
and Maiden (1986) New York: Fawcett Crest Publishing.

### Stepfamily Resources

The Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. [www.stepfam.org](http://www.stepfam.org)

The Stepfamily Network, Inc. (1-800-487-1073). Provides  
information on stepfamily resources and support groups.  
A nonprofit dedicated to helping stepfamily members  
achieve harmony and mutual respect. <http://stepfamily.net>

### Grandparent Resources

Grandparent Information Center, sponsored by the American  
Association of Retired Persons. [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

*Growing Up with Divorce* (details on behaviors at different  
age levels and how to help) by N. Kalter (1990) New York:  
Fawcett Columbine.

*Talking to Children about Separation and Divorce*,  
by R. Garon and B. Mandell (1985) Columbia, MD:  
The Family Life Center, Inc.

### Web Sites

<http://outreach.missouri.edu/cooper/fok/> Provides linkages  
to lists of books, organizations, and Web sites for parents.

<http://singleparentresources.com> Single Parent Resource Center.

[www.yourstepfamily.com](http://www.yourstepfamily.com) Your Stepfamily magazine.

[www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)

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