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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Helping Children Adjust to Divorce

A Guide for Teachers

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Approximately one of every two divorces in Missouri (51 percent) involves children. Although children whose parents divorce are at greater risk for problems such as aggression, depression, lower self-esteem and poorer school performance, most children adjust to the divorce successfully. However, the adjustment process is stressful and takes time. It is typical for children to experience distress for 1-2 years following the divorce.

Schools can play an important role in helping children make a positive adjustment to their parents' divorce. This guide suggests ways that schools, preschools and childcare centers can support children through difficult family transitions. By working together, families and schools can form a network of support that promotes healthy child development.

There are four key elements of successful family-school relationships — **approach, attitudes, atmosphere** and **action**. These four categories organize ideas for how schools can support children through family transitions.

Approach

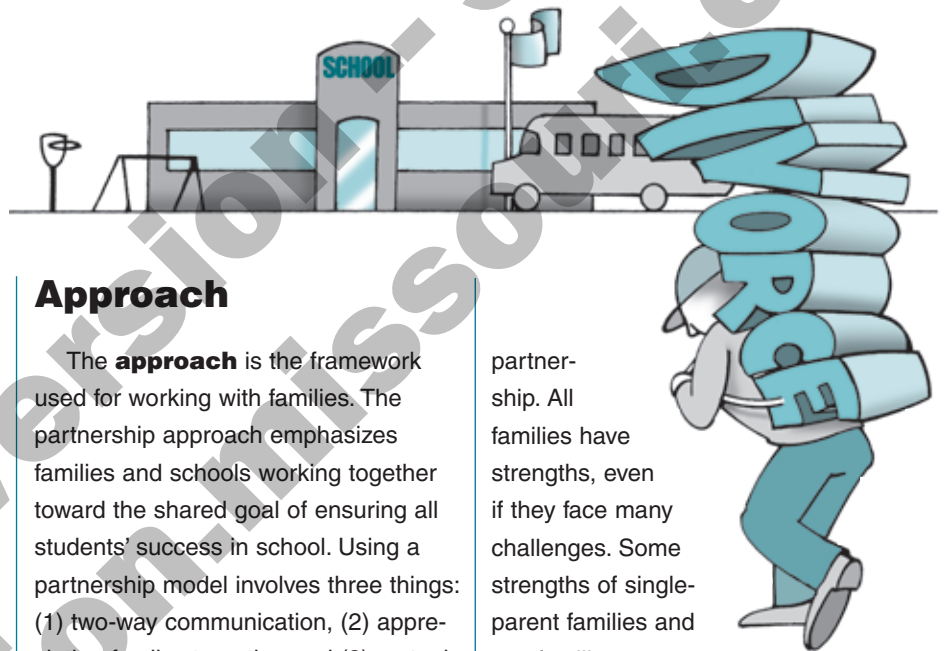
The **approach** is the framework used for working with families. The partnership approach emphasizes families and schools working together toward the shared goal of ensuring all students' success in school. Using a partnership model involves three things: (1) two-way communication, (2) appreciating family strengths, and (3) mutual problem-solving.

Two-way communication is essential for a successful partnership. This means that parents keep teachers informed about important events in their child's home life, and teachers keep parents informed about their child's school activities. If parents have recently experienced stressful life transitions, such as divorce or remarriage, their attention may be focused on the events in their lives. It may take extra initiative from teachers to obtain information.

Appreciating family strengths is also essential for forming a successful

partnership. All families have strengths, even if they face many challenges. Some strengths of single-parent families and stepfamilies are:

- **Flexibility.** Children learn to adapt to changes and to live in environments with different rules and expectations
- **Multiple role models and extended kin network.** Children living in stepfamilies often have several adult role models in their lives and a large network of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.
- **Greater independence and maturity.** Children living in single-parent families may be given greater responsibility for household tasks. They can gain a sense of competence and independence if they are



given a reasonable number (not too many) of tasks they are capable of doing.

- **Negotiation and conflict resolution skills.** When parents divorce and are able to negotiate and resolve conflicts in a constructive manner, children learn from their parents' example.
- **Parents who love them.** Most children with divorced parents have one or more parents who nurture and support them, which is a very important resource for a child living in any type of family.

A third element of working with parents as partners is **mutual problem-solving**. When a problem arises, the teacher and parent work together to solve the problem. Both teacher and parent provide their perspectives on the problem and come up with solutions together.

Attitudes

Attitudes can foster partnership or create a barrier to partnership. Viewing parent involvement as a continuum, rather than categories (uninvolved vs. involved) helps develop partnerships with parents. This means taking the perspective that all parents are involved to some degree. Some parents are involved at a high level, acting as active partners and educational leaders at home and school, whereas others are involved at lower levels, acting as a recipients of education and support from the school. For parents experiencing transitions such as divorce or remarriage, lower levels of involvement may be all that are possible.

Attitudes are often shaped by our own experiences, professional and personal, in childhood and adulthood. For example, if your parents are divorced or you have experienced a divorce, those experiences may color your

attitudes about divorced parents and their children. If you have worked with a family that had an especially hostile divorce, that experience may affect how you think about divorced parents. It is important to be aware of our attitudes about families. By knowing what our attitudes are, we can ask ourselves where those attitudes come from, and decide whether they are accurate or not. Becoming familiar with research on divorce and families can help in developing informed attitudes. See <http://missourifamilies.org> ("Relationships" section) for brief research summaries.

It is also important to be aware of parents' attitudes, which range from avoiding involvement with school to being overly involved. Most parents fall somewhere in the middle — they are happy to be involved on occasion if they are approached. Parents' attitudes are often influenced by their own experiences with school as a child. Those who had positive experiences at school may be more willing to be involved. Parents who understand the school system in the U.S. and come from similar cultures may be more likely to get involved than parents who are from cultures in which school personnel are viewed as authorities rather than partners. Parent involvement is also greater when parents perceive the school environment as warm, but structured, with clear limits and routines.

Atmosphere

An essential part of supporting divorced parents and their children is creating an atmosphere that welcomes all types of families and encourages involvement of all adults that play an important role in the child's life. One of the primary ways of creating such a welcoming atmosphere is through communication with parents. Communi-

cation that creates a welcoming atmosphere includes:

Communicating with both parents

Often, mothers manage most of the communication with the other adults in a child's life, such as child care providers, teachers and coaches. After a divorce, many assume that the communications will continue to be with the mother. However, in most cases, both parents should be actively involved in communicating with other adults in the child's life. Both parents should have equal access to health and school records unless there is legal documentation, such as a protective order, prohibiting access.

The parenting plan is a document that details how the parents will provide for the care and well-being of the child, which includes the residential and legal custody arrangements as well as the financial responsibilities of each parent. Sole legal custody gives one parent the decision-making rights, responsibilities, and authority related to the health, education and welfare of the child. Joint legal custody gives parents shared decision-making rights, responsibilities, and authority related to the health, education and welfare of the child. Physical custody designates where the child will reside and who provides the care and supervision.

Involving the nonresidential parent in school activities

Nonresidential parents often feel excluded by institutions and organizations, including schools. Invite nonresidential parents to participate in school activities, programs, and field trips. Involving the nonresidential parent in school activities encourages and supports that parent's involvement in the child's life.

Sensitivity to family diversity

Avoid terms that may be offensive to

some families, such as “broken home,” or “real parent.” Don’t assume that individuals in the same family have the same last name. Be sensitive to family differences when writing invitations for family members to participate in school activities — for example, “Bring your grandparent or grandfriend.”

Using a variety of formal and informal methods to communicate with families

- **Parent orientation nights.** Offer multiple parent orientation nights at different times and days of the week.
- **Develop a system for keeping track of family changes.** Collect parent information cards (see sample) at the beginning of the year. Send them out again mid-year, asking parents to make changes as needed.
- **Offer parent-teacher conferences at times convenient for parents.** Offer opportunities for divorced parents to have separate conferences. Some divorced parents may

be able to attend conferences together, but if there is hostility between parents, it is probably better for them to attend separately.

- **Notes home.** Make sure that the nonresidential parent receives notes, unless there is a court order that limits the parent’s access. Some teachers make up a weekly packet of information that the parent can pick up. This is more reliable than expecting the child to get the information to both parents.
- **Telephone calls.** If possible, make calls to both the residential parent and nonresidential parent. Sending a note home at the start of the year to find out when parents are available for telephone calls may make it easier to reach parents. Call parents to share both positive information and concerns.

Action

Schools are in a prime position to offer support to children experiencing family transitions because they reach

large numbers of families. There are several ways that require minimal time investment for teachers to support children experiencing parental divorce:

Provide resources to promote positive parent-child relationships

You can set up a parent information center or lending library, perhaps with the help of a parent volunteer. Consider providing information or resources on the following topics:

- Stages of child development
- Children’s responses to family transitions, such as divorce and remarriage
- Coparenting
- Single parenting
- Building family rituals and traditions
- Community resources
- Basic parenting strategies

Encourage all parents to monitor their children’s school progress

Children’s school performance may be affected when their parents divorce. However, if children continue to



achieve in school, they are less likely to develop other problems. Parents may need information about how to help their children succeed in school. Send home a handout at the beginning and middle of the school year offering tips for improving study habits. If a child is having problems with completing homework assignments, talk with parents about using daily report cards to facilitate communication between home and school. See <http://parenting-ed.org> for free parent handouts about improving study skills, using daily report cards, and many other topics.

Encourage all parents to engage in learning activities with their child at home

This is the most effective form of parent involvement for promoting student achievement. There are a variety of learning activities parents can do with their children at home. For example, parents can be encouraged to read, explore educational Web sites (see *Resource* list at the end of this guide), or play word or number games with their children, help with homework, and take their children on educational outings, such as museums or the public library.

Encourage parent networking

Rebuilding a supportive network is an important part of the process of parents' adjustment to divorce. Schools can provide opportunities for parents to interact with other parents. One way to do this is to recruit parent volunteers to coordinate events for parents, such as breakfast at school. Parents may be able to attend a breakfast meeting before work. Another idea is to ask a parent volunteer to create a parent-to-parent newsletter. Parents can contribute articles and the teacher could notify parents about upcoming events in the newsletter. Finally, a parent

volunteer can recruit other parents to participate in school activities, making a special effort to reach out to single parents, nonresidential parents and stepparents.

Classroom activities and materials

There are many ways you can integrate efforts to support children with divorced parents into your daily classroom routine. You can incorporate activities that:

- encourage understanding of different types of families,
- help children communicate about their family,
- increase self-esteem,
- help children appropriately express feelings, and
- support positive parent-child relationships.

Such activities benefit all children — not just those who have experienced parental divorce. You can also choose curriculum materials that portray different types of families positively. Finally, if you include activities that may make some children feel excluded or uncomfortable, such as making Mother's Day or Father's Day cards or gifts, adapt them so that all children feel included. Allow children to make items for all of the significant adults in their lives, if possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many children experience parental divorce and live in a stepfamily for part of their lives. Schools can support children through family transitions by taking a partnership approach, having informed attitudes, creating an atmosphere that welcomes all types of families, and taking action that supports all children and parents.

Resources

Center for Effective Parenting, <http://parenting-ed.org>. Their Web site includes information on home-school partnerships, as well as many other parenting topics, parenting handouts, and links for educators.

Missouri Families, <http://missourifamilies.org>. Provides information on a variety of family topics including divorce.

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, <http://ncpie.org/>. Gives tips for developing family-school partnerships; has an extensive list of resources

ParentLink, 1-800-552-8522, <http://outreach.missouri.edu/parentlink>. Ask questions about any parenting situation; check out books, videos, or other resources about parenting.

Parents as Teachers, <http://patnc.org>. Provides services to help parents support their children's learning. The website contains information about the location of local programs.

Educational Web sites for parents and children

<http://nationalgeographic.com>

The National Geographic Web site includes activities for children, as well as a section with information for parents on helping children with homework.

<http://nytimes.com/learning/parents/athome/index.html>

This Web site provides activities for using New York Times newspaper articles to enhance children's learning at home.

<http://school.discovery.com/school-home.html>

This Web site includes math and science information and activities for children and a section with information for parents on helping with homework.

References

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Coleman, M., Ganong, L.H., & Henry, J. (1984). What teachers should know about stepfamilies. *Childhood Education*, 60, 306-309.

Long, N. & Forehand, R. (2002). *Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust*. Chicago: Contemporary Books.

For more information

See GH 6600, *Helping Children Understand Divorce*, and GH 6602, *Activities for Helping Children Deal with Divorce*. Call 1-800-292-0969 to order a copy of either publication. For more information, please visit the MU Extension Web site at:

<http://muextension.missouri.edu/explore/>

