

# Supporting Children when Parents Divorce or Separate: Family Living Programs Impact Report



About **40%** of all first marriages end in divorce.

## The Challenge

Each year, more than 14,000 Wisconsin children experience their parents' divorce or separation. Families in transition can experience enormous amounts of stress resulting from separate living arrangements, increased financial burden, and new relationships. Exposure to parental stress and conflict is the single biggest factor affecting children as they transition from one household to two.

Problems brought on by parental disagreements can appear in different ways: decline in school performance, behavior problems, anxiety and depression. Even after a divorce or separation is over, the parents' relationship continues to affect their children. When parents argue in front of their children, or say bad things about the other parent, children suffer.

The good news is research has identified specific skills parents need to make their co-parenting relationship cooperative. Parents can smooth the transition by learning how divorce and separation affect children. By practicing ways to decrease conflict, parents can improve the chances that their children will thrive, despite temporary setbacks caused by divorce.

Wisconsin's family courts have the authority to order divorcing parents to complete up to four hours of co-parenting education. According to the law (1999 Wisconsin Act 9, 767.115), the courts may order classes that address what parents can do to make raising a child in a separated situation less stressful for the child.

## The Solution

For the last two decades, UW-Extension's Family Living educators have been working with family court officials to provide education for divorcing or separating parents with minor children. The educators teach parents the skills to support themselves and their children through this time of change.

The educators help parents learn to prevent children from witnessing parental conflict, avoid putting children in the middle, improve communication and support the role of the other parent in the child's life. Educators also review the benefits and details of having a "parenting plan" including the need to review the plan as the children grow.

**"Stay civil and get along. The kids are number one."**

-Fond du Lac County parent

