



CONNECTIONS

A NEWSLETTER ABOUT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS & PERSONAL GROWTH

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"Divorce is too complex a process to produce just winners and losers. People adjust in many different ways, and these patterns of adjusting change over time."

*E. Mavis Hetherington
and John Kelly*

Top Ten Positive Behaviors of Parents Going Through Divorce

10 Show respect for feelings.

Just as you are going through some tough times, your children will as well. Have respect for your child's feelings. Try to form an environment in which the sharing of feelings is ok.

9 Avoid the use of spies or go-betweens.

Children should never be used as spies or messengers to discover hidden secrets of the other spouse or to communicate adult things. Only adults should be involved in adult issues.

8 Steer clear of fights in front of kids.

Children do not need to witness your fighting. They may feel unsafe or become anxious during these times.

7 Be civil.

You may not like each other, but you can still be polite and civil to each other. Treat your relationship as a business relationship in which you show respect, but do not have emotional involvement.

6 Don't force children to take sides.

Some parents say or do things that are manipulative in a way that the child feels he/she has to choose between one parent or the other. Allow the child to love both parents the same.

5 Be consistent with schedules/rules.

Consistency seems to be one of the most important aspects of helping children transition. They feel more secure and safe both physically and emotionally when there is a consistency of rules and schedules at both households.

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FROM THE DESK OF

Charlotte Shoup Olsen



Divorce Issues in Kansas

We appreciate the positive responses to the September issue of the *Connections* newsletter on marriage and couple relationships.

This month's newsletter focuses on the issue of divorce, which is not always easy to talk about in Extension programming. As one agent has said, "We do not want to be perceived as promoting divorce." Our role in Extension education is to respond to community needs and to provide educational programming that addresses those documented needs.

Kansas has historically had a higher divorce rate than the national average and has only in recent years begun to experience a slight decline. Now the yearly ratio of marriages to divorces for Kansas and the U.S. are almost equal at 2:1. Providing research-based Extension education to families going

through divorce is our response to these demographic community needs.

Also, some agents throughout the state have been asked by the local legal and judicial communities to conduct workshops for divorcing parents. Thus, Extension is offering parents information that will help them understand how their *divorcing* behaviors toward each other can impact their children's adjustment and long-term well-being.

We are hopeful that other Extension information which we have to offer will ultimately help couples develop skills for building and maintaining healthy relationships.

Sincerely,
Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D.
W. Jared DuPree, MS

Answers to Questions from Kansas County Extension Agents

Question:

When we want to use information in newsletters and news columns from the *Connections* newsletter, how do we reference it?

Answer:

Since *Connections* is written for your professional use, you have permission to include segments of an article within your newsletters and news columns without referencing it. However, if you use an article in its entirety, please notate at the end of the

article, using the following sample as a guide:

Article title (Date of publication). *Connections*, Issue #, page #(s)

If you have questions about programming issues in "Strong Marital and Family Relationships," please submit your question to Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D. You can reach her in the following ways:

Email: colsen@oznet.ksu.edu

Phone: 785/532-1948

FAX: 785/532-6969

Mail 343 Justin Hall, KSU
Manhattan, KS 66506

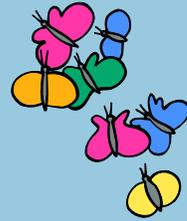
Extension Spotlight

Michelle Staudinger

Michelle Staudinger has worked as a Kansas County Extension Agent in Family and Consumer Sciences for the past five years in Ellsworth county. With her bachelor's degree in family studies and human services from K-State, the family relationships/youth development parts of her job are among her favorites. Thus, she often writes news articles and newsletter spots on various family wellness topics and works to make connections in the community with families at all levels through their involvement in church, community organizations, youth activities, and other local groups.

Some of the most rewarding aspects of her job are working with so many different people, including persons at the correctional facility (see caption), and getting to know and understand each of the communities within Ellsworth county. Building her community awareness has helped in knowing how to strengthen Extension programming in the individual communities. Keeping up with numerous projects and committees is always a challenge as all Extension agents know, but Michelle is dedicated to fulfilling each of her commitments by "making sure I'm doing them all justice." She is one of the core team members of the statewide action planning group on *Strong Marital and Family Relationships*.

Michelle grew up in a farm family in central Kansas, graduating from a small high school. She is part of a close knit farm family that includes two older sisters and a younger



"We have a somewhat unique situation in Ellsworth County having the correctional facility. One of my projects has been parenting classes for inmates and it has been a very rewarding experience. To know these men are working to improve their family situations and change behaviors in themselves makes the time and effort I spend out there well worth it!"

Michelle Staudinger

brother. Her parents are still on the family farm and she continues to spend a great deal of time there. Her hobbies include walking, cooking, and water skiing.

Of utmost importance, though, is Michelle's upcoming marriage to Allan Brokes this December. She will join Allan, his brother, and parents in working on their family farm, hoping to balance family time and her work time as they start a family after a few years.

**CONGRATULATIONS,
MICHELLE!**



PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

Helping Parents Help Their Kids During Divorce

Divorce at times can get messy. When it involves children, the mess can get even messier. Unfortunately, many children get caught in the middle of issues that should not involve children at all. Although divorce is difficult for all children, there are some things that parents can do to help them cope with the divorce better. The most important messages you can send to a child during this time are:

- ✓ **The divorce is not your fault.**
- ✓ **You do not have to choose between us (the parents).**
- ✓ **We both love you.**

In addition, parents need to be aware that divorce can influence children to react in different ways. Many of these reactions are normal even though they may be difficult to handle at the time. Some behaviors can get out of hand and may require additional help from a professional counselor or therapist. Here are some common behaviors with suggestions for different child/adolescent behaviors:



Young Children
Ages 3-9

- May become clingy. Form a consistent schedule. Tell them when you are going and when you will be back. Be specific.
- May throw temper tantrums. Once again, consistency is important. Whatever you decide to do in those situations, do it every time. Most temper tantrums in young children (2 – 4) occur due to frustrations of not

being able to communicate to you what they need. Try to take time to listen.

- May cry a lot. Emotions sometimes spill over to small incidents. Children may start to cry over little things they did not cry about in the past. Avoid intense emotional moments in front of the kids. In addition, an increase of affection, both verbally and physically, is always important during this time.



Older Children
Ages 10-18

- May become distant. During uncomfortable times, some older kids distance themselves by playing with friends a lot or staying involved with other activities. It is important to let your child have some space; at the same time, it is important to let him/her know that you are there as well. You may want to set aside a time to spend together. It is important to not talk ill of the other parent during these times.
- May become angry. Anger is a natural reaction to divorce. They may feel they were never asked about the divorce or that it is one parent's fault. Allow them to express anger in appropriate ways. Expression of anger is often times an expression of hurt feelings. Letting these feelings out in an appropriate way helps the child go through the process of healing.

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Does Divorce Always Cause Problems in Children When They Get Older?

Many have speculated about the effects of divorce on children when they reach adulthood. Some have hypothesized that children who experience divorce will have a lower quality of life in adulthood.

Some studies have found that many adults suffer from psychological difficulties due to the experience of divorce as a child. Thus, researchers from Pennsylvania State University took a sample of 137 adults that had experienced divorce as a child. They wanted to know in this longitudinal study why certain adults that had experienced divorce as a

child suffered from psychological problems and some did not.

This research found that marital discord, in general, weakened the bonds between parents and children. Furthermore, weak parent-child bonds appeared to cause more distress, low self-esteem, and general unhappiness in adults who experienced divorce as a child. Thus, the research would suggest that parents who are experiencing divorce should try to help their children maintain a bond with both parents.



Helping Parents Help Their Kids During Divorce

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When do I need to get professional help?

- If your child is having thoughts, makes statements, or attempts to hurt himself/herself or others.
- If your child is excessively clingy to the point that your family cannot function.
- Whenever you feel that extra support, an additional point of view, and/or some guidance may help your situation better.

Most kids do fine if the parents are committed to helping the children go through the process in a comfortable, loving, and patient manner. In addition, parents that seek to find their own additional support and guidance tend to have more successful attempts at helping their children.

If a bond is maintained, the research suggests that an adult will more likely not suffer some of the psychological issues that could arise. In addition, that adult would have a better chance of having less distress, higher self-esteem, and more general happiness in adulthood.



Summary: Parents of divorce should try to maintain a bond with all of their children as they go through each transition in life. Both parents should encourage their children to maintain bonds and support each other in this endeavor.

Amato, P. R. & Sobolewski, J. M. (2001). The effects of divorce and marital discord on adult's psychological well-being. *American Sociological Review*, 66, 900-921.



Resources

Resources for Working With Families Going Through Divorce

K-State Research and Extension

Family Change: Separation and Divorce is a K-State program that offers the county Extension agent and other community educators a resource with research-based information for divorcing parents with children under the age of 18. A leader's manual offers a two-hour workshop format for adults going through divorce to become aware of behaviors that can impact the transition and long term adjustment of the children as well as themselves.

The workshop leader needs to be skilled in communicating information and behavioral options, and facilitating group discussion. The manual includes masters for overheads, a participant evaluation instrument, and a certificate of completion. Bookmarks are available through Charlotte Olsen's office for marketing the program.

The manual for parents offers information to help adults going through the separation and divorce process understand personal and family adjustments, legal issues, and financial matters. It is written in question and answer format, but is not intended to be a substitute for legal advice or counseling. Rather, it is designed to provide basic, general information. Both publications can be downloaded as follows:

■ A Leader's Manual
<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/mf2543.pdf>

■ A Manual for Parents
<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/mf2539.pdf>

CYFERnet & Other Websites

<http://cyfernet.org>

This national Extension website (CYFERnet) lists 90 programs for working with divorcing families. Two programs of special note are:

Parents Forever

Publisher: University of Minnesota Extension

Description: This Extension program features a child-centered, comprehensive and straightforward response to divorce education needs. *Parents Forever* is in response to Minnesota legislation requiring educational programs for divorcing parents, and it meets the Minnesota Supreme Court's educational criteria. The curriculum has been specially designed and tested. To receive and use the materials, a professional is required to complete its online training (\$200 registration fee). The curriculum also has been translated and adapted for Spanish speaking parents. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/parentsforever/>

Coping with Separation & Divorce: A Parenting Seminar

Publisher: University of Vermont Cooperative Extension

Description: This site provides information about a four-hour educational program for parents going through divorce/separation. <http://www.uvm.edu/extension/cope/>



Videos

Children: The Experts on Divorce

This 40 minute videotape features children speaking from their own experiences of going through their parents' divorce. They explain what they need from their parents and candidly discuss their perspective about the things that divorcing parents should and shouldn't do. It can be used in educational programs working with families of divorce.

Cost: \$25.00 Order from:

Family Connections Publishing
1405 East 2100 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84105
(801)484-2100

Research-based Books

For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered, by E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly (published by W.W. Norton & Company, 2002).

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, by John Gottman and Nan Silver (published by Simon & Schuster, 1994).

Top Ten Positive Behaviors of Parents Going Through Divorce

(continued from page 1)



'No child support' does not equal 'no visitation rights.'

Some parents get involved in this revenge game that is very unfortunate and directly can harm children. If one spouse does not pay child support, this does not mean that the parent should not get visitation that month. Equally, if the parent does not allow visitation, this does not mean the parent should not send child support that month. These actions hurt kids.



Express to your child that the divorce is not the child's fault.

Children think differently than adults. Even though you may think that your children understand that the divorce is not their fault, you may be surprised. Make sure you express numerous times that the divorce is not their fault.



Allow children to express emotions appropriately.

Some parents try to cover up or ignore their children's feelings. Just as you are going through tough times, they are going through tough times, too. They look to you for emotional support. Let them express their anger, fear, sadness, and disappointment appropriately in a safe environment in which they feel it is ok to express these feelings.



Show expressions of love.

This can be done verbally, with affection, and spending time with your children. Make sure they understand that both parents still love them.