
MONTGOMERY COUNTY

CIRCUIT COURT

CO-PARENTING CLASSES: CLASS I

Presented by:
Family Division Services Court Evaluators

Housekeeping:

- Please make sure you register by giving name to presenter at beginning and end of each class to get credit.
- You must be on time for each class and stay for the entirety of each class to get credit.
- Attendance for class will be logged electronically.
- Please do not use cell phones during class.
- There will be a break in the middle of class.
- No food or drink (except water) in Jury Room.

Expectations of the class

- We understand you may not want to be here.
- We hope you will listen with an open mind.
- Please respect each other: Do not speak or behave in manner that is threatening, abusive, or aggressive.
- Please raise hands rather than calling out to avoid confusion and give everyone a chance to participate.

Why am I in this class?

- This class is designed to make you a more educated parent.
- The court prefers that people work out their differences instead of turning over control of their lives and giving up their privacy to the court.
- Remember you are not divorcing your children.
- Your divorce does not have to ruin your children's lives, but your disregard for your child's emotional needs can.

Purpose of Class: Provide education and information to help you help your child through the divorce process

- The class will not provide therapy.
- The class will not provide legal advice.
- The class is not designed to try to get you to reconcile with your spouse or to make you feel guilty.
- The class is not the place to address specific, individual problems or concerns, although we hope you will be able to apply some of what you learn to your situation.

Montgomery Co Circuit Court is using a variation of the P.E.A.C.E. Program. P.E.A.C.E. stands for Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness.

- P.E.A.C.E. was developed in New York State by mental health and legal professionals. It is being used with permission and has been modified for Montgomery County.
- The P.E.A.C.E. Program emphasizes that in most cases it is in the best interests of children that their parents agree on a cooperative post divorce parenting relationship.

Domestic Violence

- A co-parenting relationship may not be appropriate when there has been domestic violence.
- Domestic violence is *a pattern of coercive control of one partner in the relationship by the other for the purpose of domination, and it may be gained by the use of physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse.*
- Marital strife alone does not constitute domestic violence.
- If you believe you have been the victim of domestic violence, some of the topics presented in this class may not apply to you.

What are your expectations for this class?



COURT PROCESS OF DOMESTIC CASES (DIVORCE, CUSTODY, AND VISITATION)

SCHEDULING CONFERENCE

- Upon the filing of proof of proper service, the case will be set for a scheduling conference before a Family Division Magistrate.
- At the scheduling conference the Magistrate will:
 - Determine uncontested and contested issues.
 - Determine the need for any services that the court offers.
 - Schedule hearing/trial dates and deadlines for various events.
 - Issue all appropriate orders.

COPARENTING CLASSES

- Ordered when custody is disputed.
- Parties are given different dates to attend classes.
- The intent is to have the parties attend these classes prior to entering into mediation, if ordered, to be in a better frame of mind to enter into a meaningful agreement.
- Goal is to help parents help themselves and their children through this major life change.

MEDIATION/FACILITATION

- If mediation is ordered, parties will meet with a court mediator in order to arrive at an agreement that both can work with and is in the best interests of the children.
- If successful and an agreement is reached on all custody and visitation issues, once the agreement is filed, other court dates for custody and visitation will be removed from the docket.
- You may meet with a facilitator directly after your scheduling conference.

CUSTODY ASSESSMENTS OR EVALUATIONS

- Conducted by mental health professionals who work directly for the court.
- After the Scheduling Conference, will be instructed to immediately report to the Evaluators' Office for a brief intake interview.
- Custody Evaluators' job, as neutral, independent professionals, is to determine what custody and access plan might work best for the children in each particular family.
- Evaluators present an oral report of their recommendations at the Settlement Conference.
- The evaluator will be available to testify at the Merits Hearing.

PENDENTE LITE HEARING

- Usually ordered upon the request of either party at the scheduling conference.
- May be scheduled if the Magistrate determines that there are pressing issues that cannot wait for the Merits Hearing.
- Establishes temporary relief.
- Usually heard by a Magistrate.
- Possible issues could be: child support, alimony, access/visitation, & use and possession of marital home.

SETTLEMENT CONFERENCE

- A hearing at which time the parties, with their attorneys, and a Family Division Magistrate, sit down and discuss a possible settlement agreement.
- If an Assessment or Evaluation has been ordered, the Evaluator will present an oral report with recommendations.
- This is a good opportunity to utilize the resources offered by the court and to really work at making a viable agreement and plan for yourself and your children.
- If you do reach an agreement or settlement, it can be put on the record.

MERITS HEARING

- Usually occurs 45 days after the Settlement Conference.
- It is the trial, and the time to put on evidence and witnesses to present your side of the case.
- The ruling that comes out of this hearing is for the most part final.
- If it is scheduled for more than a day it will go before a Judge. If it is scheduled for a half day it will go before a Family Division Magistrate.

SUPERVISED VISITATION

- Can be ordered at the Pendente Lite hearing, Settlement Conference, the Merits Hearing, or by agreement of the parties.
- The court's program is a free service.
- A licensed professional will provide supervision to parents and their children for a variety of reasons.

Questions/Comments?



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Ice Breaker: Get in groups of 3-5 people (sitting next to you), introduce yourself, and discuss:

- What has been the most difficult part of this process for you?
 - What are you doing to cope with that?



Adult Reactions to Divorce

- How you are doing affects your children.
- Understanding the process one goes through after ending an intimate, long-term relationship often gives people more of a sense of control and a sense of hope that things will get better. This also helps your children.
- The better your adjustment to your family's reorganization, the better your children will do.

➤ Recently Separated

➤ Back to Court for Modification

➤ Never Married

Divorce is a stressor

Divorce is considered one of the greatest stressors we can go through. It is ranked by psychologists with other events that are considered stressful such as:

- Being fired from a job
- Serious illness of a family member
- Miscarriage
- Retirement
- Personal injury



Divorce is a stressor

- The process of divorce or ending an intimate relationship is like going through the death of a loved one, because it involves the same process of loss and grief.
- Divorce changes the structure of the family.
- The emotional stress caused by divorce can affect our ability to function and our physical well-being.

Divorce is a stressor

Stress can also cause:

- Interference with clear judgement
- Reduced enjoyment in activities
- Problems with fine motor coordination
- Confusion, disorganization and forgetfulness
- Mood changes—depression, frustration, hostility, helplessness, impatience and irritability, restlessness
- Lethargy
- Physical symptoms—headaches, back pain, digestive problems, asthma

What are some of the losses people experience?



Losses in Divorce

- Your companion and interests you shared together
- Your sexual relationship and the security of knowing and feeling comfortable with someone intimately
- Extended family including your child's grandparents, uncles and aunts, close family friends, and neighbors
- Joint social life
- Joint possessions
- Co-parenting relationship that is based in one household
- Self-concept and self-esteem
- Loss of conflict in home, which may be arguments and fighting or covert tension in home (walking on egg shells)

The Divorce Process

- There is no one experience of divorce. Changing status from being married to being single can present ***varied difficulties in emotional adjustments*** for people who defined themselves primarily as married or coupled.

The way parents experience divorce depends on many factors:

- The parent's socioeconomic status
- What part of the life cycle the parents are in
- Whether the divorce is “friendly” or “adversarial”
- How long the relationship was

A parent's response will vary with his/her point of view and individual experience:

- Some see divorce as failure and experience depression.
- Others define it as freedom and experience relief.
- Most fall somewhere in the middle.

The stages presented here are similar to the stages a person goes through when grieving for a death. They are simply ***general guides***.

- Some people may experience them in the order they are presented.
- Others may experience a few of the stages, but not all.
- Still others may not experience them at all.
- **The point is that *divorce is a process, and it may not be the same process for everyone.***

Four Stages of Divorce

Although individual reactions to the divorce process are varied, there is a **typical and predictable series of psychological stages** that parents pass through. The **four stages** can be labeled:

- Denial and Separation Shock
- Psychological Conflict
- Identity Work
- Acceptance

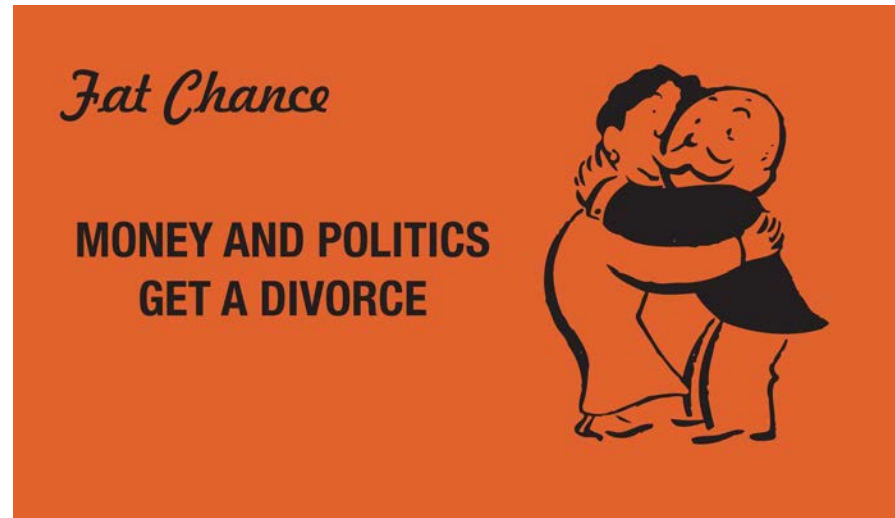
Adjustment to divorce is a process rather than a single event.

Stage I: Denial and Separation Shock

- Initially after a decision to separate permanently has been made, people say they either **feel nothing or they feel numb**. When people are overwhelmed by strong emotions, the brain has a protective mechanism that shuts feelings down, and this is called denial.
- What other feelings might a person have when they realize their relationship is over?
 - Anxiety
 - Depression
 - Rage
 - Denial
 - Guilt
 - Anger
 - Emotional Vacillation

Emotional Task in Stage I: Come to Grips With the Marriage Ending

Accepting the reality of the separation



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Stage 2: Psychological Conflict

- **Unpredictable Feelings:** People continue to experience a multitude of emotions, one occurring right after the other. One minute parents may feel perfectly comfortable with their new lifestyle, and a minute later they may find themselves in tears, reminiscing about their former spouses. Shortly thereafter, remembering a negative event or an argument, they may feel enraged.

Stage 2: Psychological Conflict

- **Scanning:** Parents will reminisce about what went wrong with their marriages, who was to blame, what their own role was in the failure. They relive the best times in the marriage and mourn the loss of the more intimate aspects. Scanning may also provide parents with much constructive insight about their own patterns in relationships. In this sense it can be a valuable learning experience.

Loss and Loneliness: During this stage a parent may experience a sense of loss and loneliness, similar to that which a person experiences at the death of a loved one. Loneliness can manifest itself in many ways:

- Some parents may become passive and isolate themselves.
- Others may experience a more active type of loneliness.
- During this time also, any negative feelings and emotions the person experienced as a child.

Stage 2: Psychological Conflict

Euphoria: Conversely, parents in Stage 2 may experience periods of euphoria. Some divorcing people feel a sense of relief, increased personal freedom, newly gained competence and reinvest emotional energy into themselves which was previously directed toward the marriage.

Emotional Task in Stage 2: Even Out the Emotional Swings

- Achieving a realistic definition of what their marriage represented, what their role was in its maintenance, and what their responsibility was for its failure.
- Sometimes you think the worst is over only to become depressed again.
- Unfortunately, this emotional see-saw makes it more difficult to work with lawyers, make decisions, and be an effective parent.

Stage 3: Identity Work

- In many ways this is the ***most psychologically stressful aspect*** of the divorcing process. Being married is a primary source of self-identity.
- At this time the divorcing person faces a major change in self-perception.
- Often during this time period, they ***may try on different identities***, attempting to find one that is comfortable for them.
- This stage offers opportunities to try new ways of being and new activities. It can be an exciting period of personal growth.

Emotional Task: Making the Psychological Transition

The emotional task for the divorcing parent at this stage is making the psychological transition from being “married” to being “single” again.

Stage 4: Acceptance

- Finally (and the time varies from months to perhaps several years), parents feel a ***sense of relief and acceptance*** about their situation.
- After a while they start to experience a new sense of strength and accomplishment.
- Parents feel quite content with their lifestyles and no longer dwell on the past.
- They now have a new sense of awareness and knowledge of their own needs.

Emotional Task: Resolving the Loss

- Although *many of the feelings triggered by divorce are painful and uncomfortable, they ultimately lead toward resolving the loss* so that, if the parent desires, he or she will be emotionally able to reestablish an intimate relationship.

Questions?

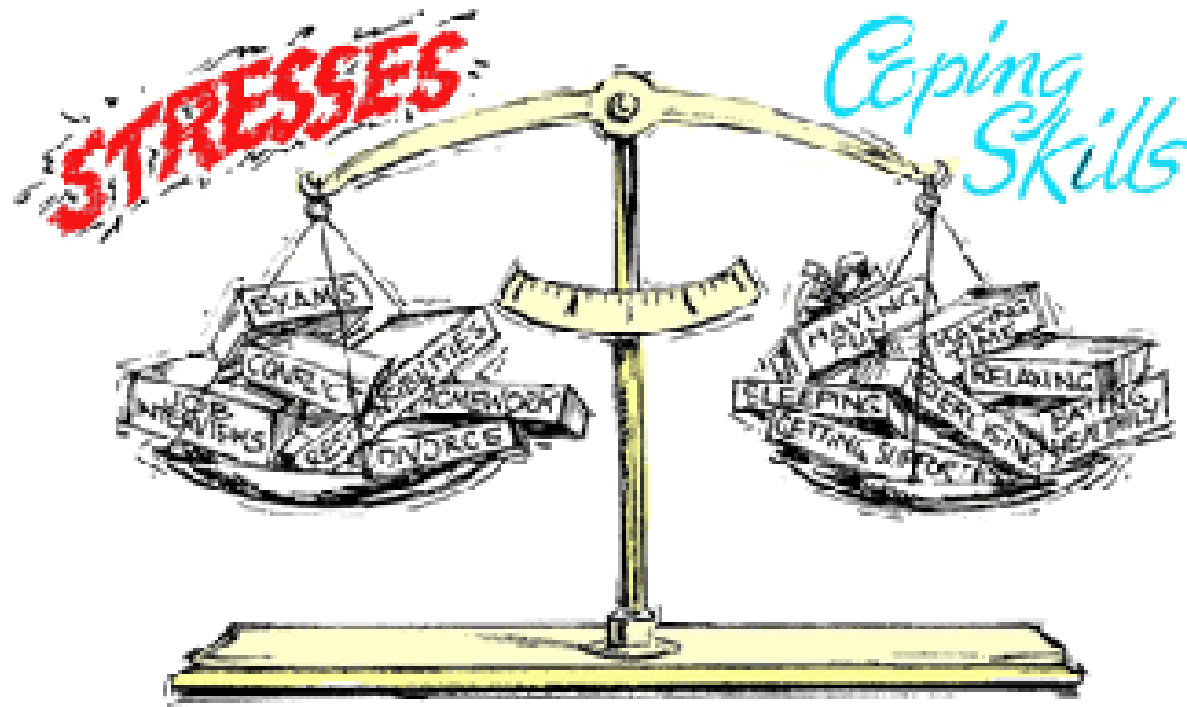


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A Word About Therapy

- While many people feel relief during and after the divorce, many others experience a wide range of discomfort at the ending of their marriages.
- Some individuals get “stuck” and would benefit from therapy.
- Parents who are continuously depressed or have suicidal ideas should seek help immediately.

This is also a great time to use your own coping strategies. What are yours?



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Single Again

- The first year of the divorce is especially difficult for children.
- When you do begin dating, talk honestly with your children. Make it clear to them if your relationships are just casual.
- Do not put them in situations in which they will begin to form an attachment with someone who is not going to be a permanent person in their lives.

Stepparent vs. Biological Parent

- Remarriage can replace a spouse but **it does not replace a biological parent.**
- The challenge of a stepfamily is to form and maintain new relationships while preserving the ones with the biological parent.
- It is very helpful for parents and biological children to have some time alone together, in addition to blended family activities.

A Healthy Step-Family

- Step-family relationships must be allowed to grow and develop at their own pace.
- Most children will have difficulty accepting discipline from the new parent. It is ***best for the natural parent to do the disciplining***, especially for older children.



Questions?



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Helpful Resources

❖ Legal Assistance:

Family Law Self-Help Center, Montgomery County Circuit Court, South Tower 1st Floor, Rm 1500 (Walk-in Service Only)

❖ Websites:

<http://montgomerycountymd.gov/cct/index.html> (Circuit Court) <http://nfrchelp.org/> (National Family Resiliency Center)

<https://www.afccnet.org/> (AFCC)

<https://www.ourfamilywizard.com/> (Shared Parenting

<http://pepparent.org/> (PEP-General Parenting Classes)

Calendar)

❖ Books for Adults:

Bonnell, K. & Little, K. (2014). *The Co-Parents' Handbook*

Eddy, B. (2014). *BIFF: Quick Responses to High Conflict People, Their Personal Attacks, Hostile Email, and Social Media Meltdowns*

Eddy, B. & Kreger, R. (2011). *Splitting: Protecting Yourself While Divorcing Someone with Borderline or Narcissistic Personality Disorder*

Emery, R. E. (2004). *The Truth about Children and Divorce*

Ricci, I. (1997). *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*

Ross, J.A. & Corcoran, J. (2011). *Joint Custody with a Jerk: Raising a Child with an Uncooperative Ex-A Hands-on, Practical Guide to Communicating with a Difficult Ex-Spouse*

Stahl, P. (2007). *Parenting After Divorce: Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs*

❖ Books for Children:

Brown, M. & Brown, L.K. (1986). *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families*

Lansky, V. (1997). *It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear: A Read-Together Book for Parents and Young Children During Divorce*

Levins, S. (2005). *Was It the Chocolate Pudding?: A Story For Little Kids About Divorce*

Masurel, C. (2003). *Two Homes*

❖ Domestic Violence:

Montgomery County Family Justice Center, Ph: 240-773-0444

House of Ruth - Domestic Violence Assistance Program, 240-777-9077, 410-889- RUTH (7884), 1-888-880-7884 (24 Hour Hotline)

Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Feelings of Loss:

- Loss of stability and of predictable future
- Loss of childhood innocence
- Loss of financial security
- Loss of sense of family; cut off from relatives
- Loss of close relationship with parent the child does not live with or see often

Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Feelings of Anxiety:

- May ask if both parents still love him/her
- Worry about who will take care of him/her presently and in future (younger children worry about consistency in routine)
- Worry about future if something should happen to the live-in parent
- Worry that family will not have enough money for food, college
- Worry about being separated from siblings
- Anxiety about having to change school, neighborhood, etc.
- Worry about being different from peers
- Concern over who will care for parent when child is not there
- May feel responsible for parent

Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Feelings of Denial:

- Try to deny what they cannot understand-divorce is a very abstract concept
- “This can’t be happening, if I don’t deal with it, it will go away”
- Confusing fantasy with reality
- “It only affects my parents, not me”

Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Feelings of Anger:

- Sense of moral unfairness-“you can't do this to me!”
- Blames parent who left or who hurt other parent
- Shows anger at parent who stayed and therefore is “safe”
- Anger at feeling powerless about situation
- Keeps distance from own and parent's pain
- Anger at loss of resources (stuff), not having what peers have
- Anger at incongruence between what parent says and does
- Have outbursts that are seemingly unrelated to the breakup

Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Feelings of Depression:

- May seem very needy and clingy
- May become very distant and withdrawn
- May become fidgety, restless or hyper
- May act out and just seem angry
- May have difficulty regulating emotions
- May show normal, adult symptoms of depression



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Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Feelings of Guilt:

- Belief that the child caused the parents to fight, separate
- Thinks he/she could have been better, nicer, etc.
- Younger child egocentric—thinks world revolves around him/her so he/she must have done something to cause divorce
- May engage in “bargaining,” consciously or unconsciously, because feels responsible for trying to get parents back together
- Older child thinks should have been able to help to prevent breakup

Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Feelings of Relief:

- Reduction of tension
- Reduction of fighting
- More time with each parent
- Closer relationship with at least one parent



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Children's Reactions to their Parents' Separation

Acceptance

- Accepts divorce as reality
- Reestablishes a sense of family and feeling of belonging
- Acknowledges sadness, but goes on with life, with own activities
- Understands what happened in order to have healthier, more satisfying relationships
- Disengages from anger
- Recognizes that lots of “normal” people get divorced
- Accept self and looks forward to future



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Group Activity

Discuss the following:

1. What are children in your age group dealing with (Ex. potty training, temper tantrums, bullying, peer pressure, etc.)?
2. How are children this age impacted by family reorganization? What do you see your child saying that may be related to it?
3. How can we as parents help children this age through the family reorganization?



End of Class I