

Children First

by

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Parents who divorce in Lewis and Clark County, Montana, are required to attend *Children First* a two hour class that describes how divorce affects children of different ages, living situations that tend to work best for children, and the effect of parental conflict on children.

While class evaluations are mostly positive, the most common complaint is, "I wish I had come to this class earlier in the divorce process." To those who need this information sooner than later, here is a short summary, and information on how to attend. *Children First* is taught by a judge, a mediator and a therapist.

One of the district court judges explains that they see more than 300 cases per year. A contested divorce will only get a half day in court, and children may not attend the hearing. Though judges rarely meet with the children, the court may consider their wishes if they are age 14 or older. The judge stresses that they will never know the whole picture, and it is far better if the parents work out their agreements in advance.

A judge will never know the whole picture. It is far better if parents work out their own agreements.

The therapist describes children's reaction to divorce—confusion, anger, sadness and an almost universal desire to get the parents back together. The most destructive thing parents can do, is continue the conflict. If parents continue to fight, their children will be pushed to

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take sides, blame themselves for the divorce, and develop poor self esteem.

The result can be emotional disturbance, failure in school, or delinquency. Children can literally feel like they are being pulled in two.

The therapist also shares information about the living arrangements that work best for children of different ages. For infancy to age three, one primary home is best, with contact with each parent every day or two that is predictable and routine.

Three to six year olds continue to need one primary home and frequent and regular contact with both parents. Children of this age

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can stay with the non-primary parent for up to a week. Using the same day care provider is highly recommended. Six to twelve year olds can spend longer periods of time with each parent. One primary home is not as important, though overnight transitions during the school week can be difficult. Good communication between the parents is important and rules that

are the same from house to house. Adolescence is a time when parental communication and consistency is crucial.

Parenting time will depend on the adaptability of the children and parents. Some children go back and forth between households very easily. For others, this is a difficult transition. For

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the emotional health of the children, parents need to focus on their children's needs, rather than their own desires or convenience.

Conflict will happen in even the best relationship. If parents cannot work out a conflict themselves, a mediator can help them come to resolution. If that doesn't work, they may hire attorneys to negotiate, or have the attorneys take it to court and let the judge decide.

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more flexible. The parents' relationship must go from casual, spontaneous, to more businesslike. Parents must go from sharing a life together to sharing their children together.

During a divorce, parents must decide how to raise their children together while living apart. They need to make major decisions with children who are emotionally needy at a time they may be experiencing overwhelming anger and grief. They will need to write a parenting plan to outline who will care for the children at what times, and for which holidays. The plan

A parenting plan provides for changing needs as lives change & children grow.

provides for changing needs as lives change and children grow, and helps avoid future court battles.

The program ends with a list of children's rights, created by three children who were caught in their parent's high conflict divorce.

Children's Rights When Parents No Longer Live Together:

1. Let us love both of you. Please don't make us take sides.
2. Don't argue when we can hear.
3. Don't say bad things about each other. And don't let other people say bad things about each other when we can hear.
4. Don't use us to give messages to each other. Talk to each other when you need to.
5. Follow the schedule unless you both agree to change it.
6. If you move away, call us, write us, don't forget us.
7. Try to agree about what's best for us.
8. Let us love both of you.

**Let us love both of you.
Please don't make us take sides.**

This essay cannot replace the information taught in *Children First*. Anyone may attend these classes taught on the second Thursday of every

month from 4:00-6:00 pm at the courthouse. To enroll call Lindsay at 447-8223. For a more complete description of a parenting plan see *Mediating Your Parenting Plan* at: <http://bit.ly/a6QMdz>.

Children First was created for the First Judicial District Court by the Equal Justice Task Force in collaboration with community professionals in child welfare and alternative dispute resolution.

To enroll in Children First
call Lindsay at 447-8223.

Linda Gryczan helps people transform conflict to cooperation at Mediation Works in Helena, Montana. She mediates; divorce, parenting plans, small claims, family and neighborhood disputes. She can be reached through www.mediationworks.tv, lindag@mediationworks.tv or (406) 431-3635. For daily conflict solving tips, follow her on Twitter @_mediationworks.

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