

# Atlanta Journal Constitution

## Putting children first after divorce Collaborative efforts urge ex-spouses to reduce stress on those caught in middle

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**DATE:** February 15, 2004

**PUBLICATION:** Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

**EDITION:** Home; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

**SECTION:** Features

**PAGE:** LS1

Even in the middle of their divorce, Jeff "Jay" McCann and Heather Rees kept one vow: Never fight in front of the **children**.

Instead, they sparred on paper, back and forth, in a blue spiral notebook.

"It gave me the chance to see what he was thinking," Rees said, "and there were no faces being made, no tone."

Seven years later, McCann coaches their 9-year-old's church basketball team. Rees is the team mom. Oh, and Rees' current husband, Phil, also coaches the team.

The team, decked out in blue and white, is called Magic. Many would call the relationship between these three the same thing -- a vision of harmony rarely seen in the wake of a divorce. "Everyone is willing to overlook their personal stuff for the benefit of the **children**," said Rees, a stay-at-home mom.

That's how it should be, of course. But until recently, it was an individual struggle to maintain civility.

Now, in an effort to get more parents to "play nice," government and private programs are aggressively reaching out to splitting couples and their kids to stop the often messy aftermath of divorce.

From mandated seminars to mediation to support groups for **children**, Georgia's judges, social workers and **child** experts are concentrating on helping divorced families communicate and collaborate better.

A lot is at stake: Statistically, **children** from divorced homes are at higher risk for violence, depression, substance abuse and poor school performance.

And according to a 2001 study, one in three **children** reported that they were still embroiled in the bitterness between battling parents five years after a divorce.

The study, published in the Journal of the American Board of Family Practice, also found that half of the women and one-third of the men were still intensely angry at their former spouses a decade after a divorce.

"These programs and things enable people to cut through the curtain of emotions, . . . rise out of the trauma and move toward a partnership," said Margot Swann of Visions Anew, a nonprofit divorce recovery organization.

'1,000 knives'

Divorcing parents nearly fill the 50 chocolate-colored seats at a jury assembly room at Cobb County Superior Court.

On this chilly, foggy January day, many appear tired; eyes red and hands clasping paper coffee cups out of a vending machine. In metro Atlanta, it's a common scene every week. Hundreds of parents file in for this seminar, required in Cobb before the judge will finalize a divorce. Many participants seem emotionless during the program until social worker Rosemary Wachtel holds up a drawing made by a small **child**.

"Divorce is like getting stabbed by 1,000 knives," the **child** had written in black marker above a red stick figure. Another drawing depicts a small **child** holding a bomb.

Some of the parents drop their heads and weep.

The pictures are an effective tool, and Wachtel is hoping to reach these parents. She and another social worker have only about five hours to persuade these parents to use common sense and courtesy when speaking to their ex-spouse.

Wachtel holds up another picture of a tree with a line down the middle. One half is the mom, the other the dad.

"And the **child** asks, 'How can I be good for something if my mom is good for nothing?'"

Everyday reality

In America, divorce becomes a part of everyday life for 1.5 million **children** annually. About 69 percent of **children** are living with married parents, down from 85 percent in 1970, according to the State of Our Unions 2003 by the National Marriage Project.

In the face of such statistics, researchers are exploring which **children** seem to survive -- even thrive -- after a divorce.

While most **children** adapt well, between 20 percent and 25 percent suffer significant adjustment problems, such as depression and substance abuse, as teenagers, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

Wake Forest University professor of psychology Christy Buchanan has studied the impact of divorce on **children** for more than 15 years.

A key predictor of depression in **children**, she said, is the feeling of being caught between their parents -- from the constant quizzing from house to house to even being asked whom they like more.

"Whatever the level of conflict or hostility you feel toward your ex-spouse," Buchanan said, "try to isolate it so the **children** are not drawn into it."

LeAnne Benfield, a 37-year-old free-lance writer who lives in Suwanee, said the mandatory parenting seminar in Gwinnett County and support groups at her church have helped her carve out an upbeat, **child**-focused relationship with her ex-husband.

"When her dad is coming to pick her up, she gets so excited, and I will say, 'Daddy's here! Daddy's here!' and it's not fake. I am celebrating with her. I do it for her, not for him," said Benfield. She said she almost always communicates with her ex-husband via e-mail because it is less emotional for her.

Her ex-husband, Steve Benfield, who recently remarried, said he and his new wife also make sure to speak favorably of his ex-wife with 4-year-old Madeline.

"We are not vindictive or spiteful people, and we are both very dedicated to Madeline, so I really couldn't see it going any other way," Benfield said.

David Alexander, an Atlanta **child** specialist who works in mediation, said such maturity of communication between parents is key.

"The better the quality," he said, "the better the prognosis."

A new approach to divorce

Atlanta family law attorney Lauren Alexander (no relation to David Alexander) remembers helplessly watching an involved and loving father lose a bitter custody battle. It was a turning point: She decided her life as a litigator was over.

Alexander now practices only "collaborative" law, a radically different approach to divorce. Collaborative law is a fledgling practice in Georgia, with its **first** trained lawyer arriving here just five years ago. Now more than 100 attorneys statewide have gone through the training. The collaborative approach requires divorcing parents and their attorneys to meet face to face, pool resources for **child** specialists and voluntarily provide financial records.

The approach is not for everyone. Besides the parties' signing an agreement saying they will not go to court, collaboration calls for a spirit of goodwill and several goal-oriented meetings. "If you have a couple who is so invested in fighting, collaborative is not appropriate," said Diane Woods, a Marietta family law attorney who does both traditional and collaborative divorces. Phil and Bronwyn Sellers, who divorced in 1996 and who both live in Tucker, recently used the collaborative approach to negotiate a new custody arrangement for their 13-year-old son. They didn't want to return to the door-slamming and cold shoulders of their original divorce proceedings. The couple had made progress in their communication in recent years and wanted to continue on the same path.

Phil Sellers said they realized that he and his ex-wife needed more regular, and in-depth, discussions about Ian instead of a quick few-words exchange as their **child** left one house for the other.

"He voices his problems; I voice mine," Bronwyn Sellers said.

The Sellers also had to compromise. He got the fifty-fifty custody split he wanted, but on a different schedule. She had to bend on the financial arrangement.

"It's a negotiation process," Phil Sellers said.

'My daddy never showed up'

While some divorcing parents struggle with overwhelming anger, their **children** often struggle with overwhelming grief. However, kids sometimes find they have no safe haven for discussing their feelings about the adults they love who are splitting up.

Instead, they act out.

A 6-year-old kicks a playmate, for example. "And we see her as naughty," said Colleen Swift, director of Rainbows, a recovery program for **children** of divorce. But when the **child** is asked why she kicked her playmate, "she says, 'My daddy never showed up.' "

In the past few years, many Georgia counties, including Gwinnett and Cobb, have started offering voluntary seminars for **children** to help them avoid self-destructive behaviors from fighting to substance abuse.

Often these seminars run parallel with ones for parents. **Children** illustrate their feelings and heartache on reams of white paper and talk openly in the company of one or two adults (no parents allowed).

Also, Rainbows, a nonprofit that offers free 14-week support groups for **children** suffering from divorce or other losses, is gaining momentum at area schools and churches.

Started in the early 1990s in Georgia, Rainbows initially served about 300 **children** a year. Last year, it served 3,000 kids across the state, allowing them to talk, cry and vent in the company of their peers.

Rainbows' signature small-group settings are often filled with tears, and **children** sometimes get physically sick talking about divorce, Swift said.

At the 14-week end date, many **children** grow to accept the divorce as they participate in an activity-filled "Celebrate Me" day in which some kids paint rainbows on banners and others write hopeful messages on cotton sheets. For **children** in dire situations, a Rainbows coordinator recommends further counseling.

This international organization is also in the midst of establishing sessions for preschoolers at area day care centers.

"We have **children** being reprimanded for acting out their feelings," said Swift. "We give them a place where **children** can voice that hurt and realize they are not alone."

'They make it work for us'

Hunter McCann, 11, eagerly shows a visitor a poster he made last year. The words "My Heroes" are in red marker. Then there are three smiling orange figures: his mom, dad and stepfather. When asked about whether the 1997 divorce has been painful, Hunter says, "No, not really." "It makes me feel really good that my parents get along," he said. "It makes me feel really loved that they make it work for us."

As his parents listen, they get teary-eyed.

Heather Rees and Jeff McCann, who share custody, didn't develop a positive co-parenting relationship overnight.

They point to hard work, swallowing their pride and creating a support network to help them maintain an amicable relationship.

Rees and McCann went to counseling for about a month during the divorce proceedings to learn new skills, such as drafting a detailed calendar a month in advance.

They have been tested.

After the divorce, Rees wanted to continue taking the **children** on a traditional family beach vacation in Florida. The only hitch was it always fell on Father's Day -- a day McCann would naturally want to spend with his kids.

But rather than fighting it, McCann drives to Florida the second half of the week and joins the family.

Another time, Veronica was begging to go home with him after a birthday party, but she was scheduled to spend that night with her mother.

"I wanted to cry, but I just keep reminding myself that I need to do what's best for the **children**," McCann said. "Us arguing and getting really intense, that's not going to do it."

Now the family works smoothly enough that McCann and Phil Rees, a lawyer and owner of a health care company, can co-coach their daughters' basketball team. Not only does Veronica play on Magic, but Phil's 8-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, Samantha, plays too.

After an initial chilly and awkward period, Phil Rees remembers McCann taking him aside and saying, "I wasn't married to you. I was married to Heather -- and issues I have had are with her and not you."

The family is now at a point where they can even joke about where a **child** is going to spend the night -- once the source of hostile exchanges.

On a recent evening, McCann stopped by to see his **children** at Rees' brick ranch home. Veronica, already in her pink pajamas, put her head inside her father's jacket.

"La de dah, better go," said McCann, lumbering toward the front door, with a trail of giggles. "Oh, Jay, you better lay off the chocolates, you are looking like a baboon," Rees said.

Veronica bursts out laughing, jumps out of her dad's jacket, runs over to her mom and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

"Just kidding," says a smiling Veronica. "I know I am here tonight."

News researcher Nisa Asokan contributed to this article.

Photo: **Putting** Veronica McCann, 9, (left) and Samantha Rees, 8, **first** -- and not their own conflicts and feelings -- has helped keep relations smooth among Phil Rees (right), his wife, Heather Rees, and Jeff McCann, Heather's ex-husband. Jeff and Phil both coach the stepsisters' church basketball team. / CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff

Graphic: Illustration of a **child** climbing up the branch of a tree as parents fight each other on another limb of the tree. / WALTER CUMMING / Staff

Graphic: ENDING THE NEGATIVITY

Parents often have no clue how much a vicious relationship with their ex-spouse can damage their **children**.

"A mother or father would throw themselves in front of a charging wild animal to save their **children**," said Margot Swann of Visions Anew, a divorce support group, "but many don't realize their negative emotions are causing irreparable harm."

"If they realized it, they wouldn't do it, but they get enveloped in their anger, pain and fear and they are not seeing it," she said.

For those parents struggling with hostility, there's always hope the pattern can be reversed.

Experts make the following recommendations to ease tension:

- Draft a calendar at least a month in advance; discuss important holidays at least a year in advance.
- If phone or face-to-face conversations are tense, try e-mailing or faxing messages.
- Do not ask **children** to carry messages back and forth.
- Do not degrade the other parent in front of the **child**.
- Pay attention to tone when talking to your ex.
- Make sure the **children** know (again and again) the divorce is not their fault.
- Consider therapy during the divorce proceedings to help make the transition to co-parenting.
- Consider therapy for the **children**.
- Do not lean on your **children** for emotional support.
- Get involved in divorce support groups.
- For more information about collaborative law and a list of attorneys in Georgia who practice the collaborative approach: [www.collaborativelawga.com](http://www.collaborativelawga.com).
- For general information about the Rainbows organization: [www.rainbows.org](http://www.rainbows.org). For more information about the Georgia chapter: 770-321-9636.