

Divorce Education For Parents and Grandparents

By Richard S. Victor, Esq.

Starting almost seven years ago in Oakland County, Michigan, an experimental program known as "SMILE" (State Making It Liveable For Everyone) was created by the Honorable Edward Sosnick of the Oakland County, Michigan, Circuit Court and GRO Founder, Attorney Richard S. Victor. SMILE is education for parents who are going through separation and/or divorce. The educational material involved with this program assists adults in recognizing what parents and children go through following separation and divorce and provides useful suggestions on how to make this most difficult period more liveable. It provides positive suggestions on how the family of a child(ren) can help the child(ren) through this most difficult and emotional roller coaster in their life.

Extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc., also learn how children, at each developmental stage in their life, will adjust and internalize the divorce process.

Many children who have been interviewed as part of this project say that when they find out that their parents are separating and/or divorcing they feel as if they've been subject to a "drive-by shooting". They become victims of decisions made by others without any input from them, despite the significant impact those decisions have on their own lives. Adults who have the opportunity to receive this divorce education learn what they go through during separation and/or divorce, as well as what their children experience.

The five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) are discussed with an understanding of how children will respond while they going through these five different stages. Adults, at the same time, are going through this grief process. Through the education they receive from SMILE adults learn how to cope with their own lives, as well as how to help their children.

"The greatest gift you can give your children is the right to love the other parent." Richard S. Victor

Similar divorce education programs have been started, since the inception of SMILE, throughout the United States. Many of these programs utilize a video which embodies the teachings of SMILE known as "Listen to the Children". This video was produced by the Family Law Section of the State Bar of Michigan. It has been disseminated throughout the United States and is currently used in many colleges/universities, as well as mental health facilities as part of or supplement to parent education programs regarding divorce education throughout the country. Many counties in different geographic areas have made a parent education program (such as SMILE) or the viewing of the "Listen to the Children" video mandatory before parents can receive a divorce if they have minor children. The program teaches parents that despite the fact that they may be divorcing that they are the parents to the same children and will be the grandparents to the same grandchildren. They are and they will be tied to each other for the rest of their lives. So their respect (or non respect) that they show to each other during the divorce and separation process will most probably govern their code of conduct for years to come. These divorce education programs helps adults (parents, grandparents, and other concerned individuals) recognize the feelings that they have during the divorce and separation process are similar to those of the other spouse. However, it is essential not to allow illogical behavior that comes as a reaction to the feelings of betrayal, disappointments, anger and resentment which, in many instances is a result of the divorce process, to interfere with the parents responsibilities with the child(ren). Parents and other interested adults in a child's life, must recognize that the child(ren) has a need to love both parents and their grandparents. They have too, they need too, even parents who many not always deserve that love. SMILE, as well as most other divorce or parent education programs which are now in almost every state in the country, have one common goal which they ask all adults to recognize: **The greatest gift you can give your children is the right to love the other parent. When adults do this, they open a door for children that can never be closed. They give permission to their children to rise above the divorce and separation tragedy which has affected their family and to recognize that though their life may be changing, it does not necessarily mean they have lost their family.**

These divorce education programs and the forty-seven minute video entitled "Listen to the Children" are helpful to grandparents so that they can better understand what their children and their grandchildren are going through following separation and divorce. SMILE teaches that parents may be divorcing each other, but they are not divorcing their children.

Suggestions on how to keep the breakup of a family from ruining the lives of children include:

Don't use the children as pawns to hurt the other side.

Don't speak negatively about the other parent or put the children in the position of having to take sides.

Don't use the children to carry messages to the other parent.

Tell the children that the divorce is not their fault, it's the parents doing. Answer their question together, if possible.

Don't argue in front of the children.

Don't discuss child support in front of the children.

Do not bad mouth the other parent so that a child hears this.

Tell the children that they are loved and they will be taken care of.

Include the other parent in school and other important activities.

Encourage the relationship between the child(ren) and the other parent.

Do not attempt to cut a child off from his or her grandparents simply to get even with the other side.