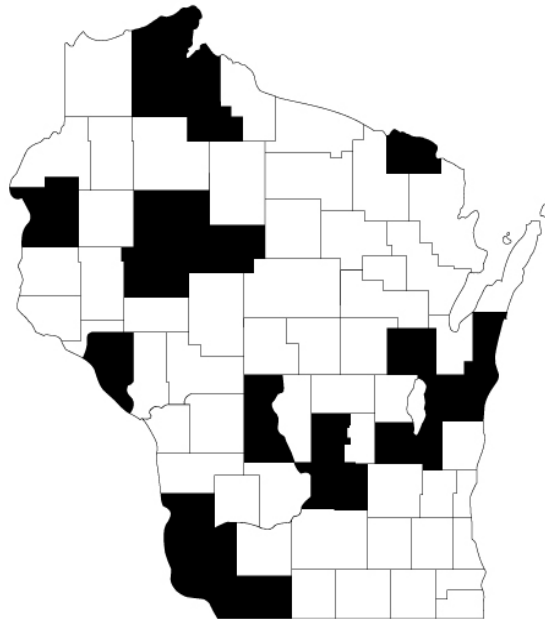


**Impact Report 2013:**

*Supporting children  
when parents divorce or separate.*



**A Statewide Program of UW-Extension -- Family Living Programs**

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## *Co-Parenting Programs from UW-Extension*

### **The Situation**

Divorce and separation are common today—about 40% of all first marriages end in divorce—but they still have serious impacts on families, and especially on children. More than 16,000 Wisconsin children experienced their parents' divorce last year. Thousands more children experienced the separation of their never-married parents, which causes the same stresses and conflicts.

Exposure to parental conflict is one of the major ways a break-up affects children. In fact, parental conflict harms children regardless of whether their parents divorce or stay together. These effects can be observed by researchers for years prior to the separation or divorce taking place. Problems brought on by parental conflict can appear in different ways—a drop in school performance, behavior problems at school, anxiety and depression.

Even after the divorce, the parents' relationship continues to affect their children. When parents argue in front of their children, solve problems immaturely (for example, by becoming emotional or calling each other names), or say bad things about the other parent, children suffer. The good news is that research has identified the skills parents need to make their co-parenting relationship cooperative, and programs to teach those skills have been developed by UW-Extension and others.

### **The Extension Response**

For the last 20 years, Cooperative Extension's family living educators have been working with family court commissioners and judges to conduct educational programs for divorcing and separating parents. Last year, UW-Extension provided co-parenting education to over 1,800 parents (of nearly 3,000 children) in 19 Wisconsin counties.

While the programs look slightly different in each county, the goals are the same. The programs help parents understand the impact of divorce on their children, acknowledge the important role both parents continue to play in their children's lives, and build the skills needed to successfully co-parent in the years ahead. A total of 130 programs were delivered to parents in 2012, ranging from 2 to 8 hours each, in small groups averaging about 14 participants. Almost 500 teaching hours were delivered, the equivalent of teaching 11 college-level courses across the state.

### **Perceived Quality and Usefulness of the Programs**

Most of the parents in these Extension programs are court-ordered to attend, and some are both unhappy and uncooperative when they arrive. Despite this, most express high appreciation for the course on completion. For example, in Columbia County almost 90% of the 189 participants (last year) were court-ordered, yet 93% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The program was a good use of my time."

In Crawford County, participants were asked to rate the usefulness of their different sources of advice on parenting after divorce, and 20% to 33% reported that their relatives, friends, or attorney were “very helpful.” More than twice that many (71%) said the Extension workshop was very helpful. Comments like these were common across the state:

*“At first it was a check-the-box thing for me –a requirement. Now I see the class as a MUST for all divorcing / separating families.”* (Polk County)

*“Very important program! I appreciate that this is mandatory. Great job!”*  
(Waupaca County)

*“I am glad I was forced to come because a lot of what was said in the videos and by Kathy is relevant to my situation.”* (Juneau County)

According to participants, one reason for the effectiveness of these classes is that they are very well taught. Respondents identified many of the specific things they liked about the way the classes were organized and taught:

*“The videos showing real life situations and how to handle them.”* (Juneau County)

*“Not a boring lecture, but an interaction with other divorcing parents.”*  
(Lafayette County)

*“It was very much to the point.”* (Columbia County)

## **Learning of Specific Skills**

In most counties, parents are asked about their knowledge of key co-parenting skills before and after the Extension program, and the evaluations confirm significant gains by participants. For example, in Fond du Lac County, significant gains were found in:

- \* participants’ relationship with the other parent.
- \* their adoption of an emotionally neutral, problem-solving approach to their relationship with the other parent.
- \* their commitment to supporting the parenting role of the other parent.
- \* their commitment to a written parenting plan with the other parent.

Parents’ comments following the workshops confirmed that they were learning the specific co-parenting skills being taught. When asked what they intended to do differently after the class, comments like these were common:

*“Communicate with child’s other parent more frequently and positively.”*  
(Columbia County)

*“No talking negatively about the other parent ever.”* (Fond du Lac County)

*“To think more about the children, not ourselves.”* (Ashland County)

*“Learn to better involve the other parent in my children’s activities.”*  
(Crawford County)

## **1-Year Follow-Up**

In Chippewa County, parents who attended the co-parenting class were contacted again, up to 18 months later, to see if the skills learned in the class were still helpful and continuing to be used. They responded “yes”: the skills were still very helpful. Prior to the class, almost zero parents said they cooperated frequently with the co-parent, but this rose to almost 90% reporting they cooperated “almost always” a year after the class.

## **Impact on Reduced Court Costs**

If the parents are learning these co-parenting skills, their level of continuing conflict should be much reduced. This will certainly help their children, and it will also help the courts, which must deal with continuing conflicts that lead to lawsuits over child custody, child support payments, and spousal support payments.

Because lawsuits like these become part of the public record, the family living educator in one county decided to investigate whether her co-parenting classes were reducing the number of lawsuits in her county’s courts. She compared the divorce-related lawsuits from the two years prior to her starting to teach co-parenting classes, with the years immediately after the classes began, and compared to statewide statistics for those years as well.

Sure enough, lawsuits over child custody, child support, and spousal support were cut in half in Richland County after UW-Extension began offering the co-parenting classes. Parents were also more likely to pay child support on time. These outcomes reduce the public costs of the court system, while creating significantly better lives for both parents and their children.

## **Overall**

Overall, this program appears to have significantly reduced the heartache, and improved the life chances, of large numbers of adults and children across the state, while also saving public monies by reducing court costs. This program appears to be another good example of UW-Extension matching the research-based expertise of the university with excellent instructional capabilities on the local level throughout the state. Participants were very thankful for this program:

*“I just hope my ex gets as much out of this as I did.”* (Columbia County)

*Thank you for everything the class has taught me. My relationship with the other parent is getting better.* (Crawford County)

*“I learned more than I thought I would.”* (Lafayette County)