**The key insight from research:**

**Continuing parental conflict is the real problem.**

*Dave Riley, Ph.D. UW-Madison / Extension*

The Key Insight

We used to think that the divorce is what caused difficulties for children. Then researchers began to study families prospectively (not retrospectively), from the marriage through the birth of children and (for some) to eventual divorce. They found they could spot the “effects of divorce” as much as 10 years prior to the divorce! The cause of children’s difficulties was the parental conflict that went on for years.

Divorce is a side effect of the real problem. The real problem is the conflicted relationship between the parents. Parental conflict causes both the divorce and the negative effects on children, which can be observed many years before the divorce itself.

Child Development Problems

Parental

Conflict

Divorce

One way to summarize these findings: The co-parental relationship is the key whether the parents are married or not. If we can help that co-parental relationship, we can help both the parents and their children lead much better lives.

Implications for the Teaching of Co-Parenting Skills

Some children do well after divorce, while others have many problems. Research studies have found that the co-parenting relationship makes the biggest difference in these child outcomes. These studies show us the co-parenting skills we should be teaching in our Extension co-parenting curricula. And, in fact, these are the same skills taught in the programs that have been evaluated and found to have really big impacts. Here are some of the key co-parenting skills we should be teaching.

\* Learn to encapsulate conflict (away from children’s eyes and ears).

\* Learn to avoid putting children in the middle of adult relationships.

\* Learn a more business-like, emotionally neutral style of communication

w/ the other parent (mature style of problem solving).

\* Learn to support the ex-partner’s parental role, rather than undercutting them in the child’s eyes.

These are, in fact, the exact skills taught in our UW-Extension Co-Parenting classes. We also include one additional aim, which is a requirement in contested divorces and a big aid to good communication and mature problem solving:

\* Learn the value of a written, agreed-upon Parenting Plan.