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## New York State Helps Divorcing Parents Help Their Kids

by: Susan L. Pollet

More than 1 million children are affected each year by their parents' separation or divorce. The upheaval caused by their parents' breakup can have a devastating effect on children, which is intensified when parents are in conflict. Experience has shown that if parents are educated to understand the psychological and legal process they are undergoing, the outcomes are more positive for all involved. In New York State, the **Parent Education and Awareness Program** teaches parents ways they can reduce the stress of family changes and protect their children from the negative effects of ongoing conflict to promote their children's healthy adjustment and development.

There are certified programs with a presence in all 62 counties in New York State at 98 sites. Families are referred to the program by family court judges, attorneys, mediators, mental health professionals, concerned individuals, or through parents' self-referral. Some of the programs are free. If there is a charge, it cannot be more than \$100 per parent. Most individual programs have sliding scales based upon income.

Parent education offers parents information, ideas, and strategies for dealing with their new family situation and focuses them on their children's needs. The classes are taught using lectures, videos, slides, role playing, skills training, and discussion.

The four broad topics covered in the **Parenting** and **Child Well-Being** portion, which is usually taught by a mental health professional or parent educator, include the following:

- Creating and maintaining supportive parent-child relationships;
- Providing a stable, supportive home environment;
- Maintaining healthy parental functioning and psychological well-being; and
- Protecting children from ongoing conflict between parents, which includes a discussion of parallel and cooperative parenting.

There is also a short overview of the legal process taught by a lawyer and/or a judge that covers the following:

- Legal terminology regarding custody and visitation;
- Various options for resolving disagreements;
- The court custody/visitation decision-making process;
- The importance of paying child support on time and in full and obeying court orders; and
- Domestic violence and the continuum between cooperative and parallel parenting.

The Parent Education and Awareness Program offers families a message of hope and empowerment. It shows that there are ways parents can help their children survive and even thrive after a breakup.

Parents in New York State who want to learn more about the certified programs in their area can contact the court clerk's office at the local courthouse, visit the website at [www.nycourts.gov/parented](http://www.nycourts.gov/parented), or call toll free (888) 809-2798. Parents in other states should check with their family law attorney or court clerk to see if a similar program is available in their area.

*Susan L. Pollet is counsel and director of New York State Parent Education & Awareness Program, White Plains, New York.*