

Preventive Intervention

Assisting divorced mothers and their adolescent children

By Lorraine B. Kingdon and Susan McGinley

Divorced mothers were less depressed. They communicated more effectively with their adolescent children, discussing their future education and careers more often, and criticizing the non-resident fathers less often. The divorced families fought less over decisions.

These were the results of an intervention program designed by Bonnie Barber, associate professor in the Division of Family Studies and Human Development, in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences. The program has been used by Coconino County Cooperative Extension, extension offices in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and by a university psychological clinic in Australia.

"Although there are numerous programs for children of divorce, none specifically targeted the developmental capacities or requirements of adolescents and their mothers," Barber says. "For adolescents living with their divorced mothers, it is critical to focus on mother-child relationships, because mothers have such a great potential to guide and advise their teenagers."

Divorce has been implicated in social, emotional, behavioral and scholastic problems. Usually, families resume normal functioning within a few years, according to Barber, but a substantial number of adolescents remain at a disadvantage even six years later.

The "Families and Successful Teens" program (FAST) included two components, one for mothers, to increase the effectiveness of their parenting skills, and the other for teens, to improve their goal-setting, communication and coping skills. The groups met weekly for two hours in churches and schools. Each meeting began with dinner for all participants, followed by break-out



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sessions where the mothers and teens worked in separate groups.

The seven-week program began with participants sharing their experiences living in a divorced family, and with facilitators working to highlight shared experiences and the strengths each person brought to the group. This technique helped participants understand they were not alone.

Next, both mothers and teens explored their vision for a positive future. For the short term, mothers discussed the importance of consistently enforcing rules and limits in helping their child to meet their goals. They learned discipline strategies that work. For the longer range, mothers identified the constraints they faced, such as inadequate financial resources for college dreams. They tried to see how their families might overcome such problems. The adolescents also explored how their current behaviors help them achieve their goals.

The program also included strategies for effective communication. Mothers and adolescents learned listening, practical problem-solving and negotiation skills. Often parents shared personal examples of the ways they had successfully used program

techniques with their teens. To make the program fun for teens, Barber has developed a series of games to teach program concepts. One such game resembles Trivial Pursuit®, where the teenagers themselves become the game pieces, rolling a giant die and walking on the game board to each question.

"We find the games are an engaging way to keep the teen's attention for the duration of the two-hour program," Barber says. All teen sessions concluded with journal-writing to provide the opportunity to reflect on the topics covered and the impact on their own lives.

Reports collected from both the teens and their mothers have been encouraging, and show that the program has been especially effective in the areas of communication and maternal depression.

"We know that divorce can be stressful, at least in the short-term, for families," Barber says, "but many adolescents can do very well. For many teenagers, it is a time of enhanced responsibility, mature self-reliance, and identification with positive goals and values. How can we increase the likelihood that a mother and her teen will successfully navigate the adolescent years? That is our research focus." ❖

