

TOPIC: SEPARATION AND DIVORCE¹

Estimated Time: Six periods of 60-75 minutes each.
Reduced time periods will require omitting some procedures.

Grade Levels: 6-8 for students in separated or divorced families.
Focus: Education and Skill Building.²

Text: Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids: Feeling At Home in One Home or Two. 271 pages. Each student should have his or her own text and feel free to read any or all of it at any time. Text has three major parts, *I Separation, Divorce; II Stepfamilies; and III Believe in Yourself* (health, safety, setting goals, following dreams and life truths.) Each sub-section includes practical solutions, ways to gain life skills for greater resiliency, are respectful of parental roles. All sub-sections are simply written and are usually 1-3 pages long. This text is designed so that any class or group can design their own class or seminar based on their own selection of sections. This particular lesson plan concentrates on most of Part I and Chapter 11 from Part III. Permission for use is free³.

Course Outline:

- **Meeting 1** Introductions, Ground Rules; Traveling through "Separation and Divorce Territory" What's True and Not True, Questions and Answers
- **Meeting 2** Stress, Feeling "Soup", Parents and Siblings (Part 1)
- **Meeting 3** One Home or Two, Staying Connected, Parents (Part 2)
- **Meeting 4** The "Miserable Middle", Finding Solutions
- **Meeting 5** Dreams and Goals
- **Meeting 6..**Parents Dating, The Family Team, and a New Kind of Normal

Introduction: Separation and Divorce

This group model, based on Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids: Feeling at Home in One Home or Two, provides a framework for understanding separation and divorce while also enhancing resiliency through skill-building tips, exercises, and step-by-step solutions thereby providing the student with the opportunity to develop a sense of control and self-mastery. Many students of this age do not confide in others including their peers and are often relieved to learn that they are not alone and that they can do things to help themselves. In this education class, the student is not urged to disclose any personal

¹ Published class titles may want to omit the terms "divorce" or "separation" and give the class/group a general title such as "Life Transitions", "Reorganization", and "Family Life Science".

² NOTE: Counseling Groups: This plan may also be used as a basis for a counseling group where deeper feelings and experiences may be explored. Family Life Education Class, grades 9-12: Lesson Plans that would include students from both intact and separated/divorced families may be available by May 1, 2007.

³ Permission to use and adapt this lesson plan is free. Please email drricci@isolinaricci.com.

information or reveal deep feelings although he or she may choose to do so. The text is very respectful of parental roles while also providing many examples where the reader learns that a child is not responsible for adult decisions and that separation and divorce is never a child's fault or responsibility. While this is not a therapy group, the educative process often has a calming effect when information dispels unrealistic fears. helps students place their experiences in a more hopeful perspective, and provides tools for playing an active role in managing their own lives and emotions.

Overall Objectives:

1. Identify and discuss the questions raised by separation and divorce.
2. Provide structures for conceptualizing family reorganization and coping with change
3. Provide a safe environment for discussing sensitive subjects
4. Encourage resiliency by teaching skills especially important for successful family transitions but also as life skills:
5. Enhance student self-esteem and reduce anxiety or confusion about family changes
6. Generate respect for each student and each student's family.

Preparation and Materials Needed:

- Text: Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids
- Whiteboard with colored markers
- Newsprint with colored markers
- Masking Tape or pins to display newsprint on wall or bulletin board
- Name tags
- Copies of the map of Separation and Divorce Territory, page 2 if students do not have copies of the text.
- A simple freehand drawing of a large empty soup pot large (see page 12) on large newsprint
- Copies of Problem Solving Solution forms on pages 236-237 and 241-242 to distribute.
- Paper and pencils
- Snacks and drinks

MEETING 1

Introductions, Ground Rules; Traveling through "Separation and Divorce Territory", What's True and Not True, Questions and Answers

Objectives: To establish a sense of safety, commonality and mutual respect, to introduce a framework for structuring and understanding the separation and divorce experience, and address many of the pressing questions. Family change is seen as a process, not an event.

Materials: Text: Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids; Whiteboard with colored markers; newsprint with colored markers; masking tape or pins to display newsprint on

wall or tack board; name tags; copies of the map of separation and divorce territory, page 2 if students do not have copies of the text; paper and pencils; snacks and drinks

Procedures:

1. Introductions and building rapport.

- Name tags worn by all students unless they all already know one another
- Each student says their name and what town/city/district they live in.
Options: a student adds the class they attended just before this OR the last one of their normal day in school, or add any tests coming this week.
- Which is the lie? Tell three things about yourself, two are true, one is false. Group has to guess which thing is the lie.
- How did you come to be in this group?
- Set out the snack and drinks. Replenish after 30 minutes.

2. Group ground rules. Describe expectations for behavior. The students develop a list of ways they will respect and listen to each other. Even if this is not a counseling group, explain confidentiality and obtain their agreement. Some students will reveal personal information that should be protected. Write agreements on newsprint. This newsprint will be put up at each subsequent meeting.

3. Introduce the subject in a way that acknowledges all the different varieties of family structures and family changes. For example: At least half of all families in the US have children who have parents who are single, separated, divorced, or remarried. Some family changes are little, others are big. Some are hard and others are perhaps hard at first but end up good later. Some children move to another school and another house. Some see a parent more than before, others less than before and some don't see the other parent at all. Some children keep the same friends, see their important relatives like they did before, others don't. Often, there are different schedules for school time, weekends, and holidays and summers than before. Every family is different but each family is still a real family. This group is a way to learn about different things that come with family changes like separation and divorce, get some questions answered, and learn ways to stay strong and get smarter about things.

4. Students read pages xix-xx, "Kids Read This Page First" and the introductory pages to Part I of the text, pages 3-5. Discuss different things that can happen during each stage shown in the drawing (Example: Stage 1, parents are arguing or at least not agreeing, people are sad or upset; Stage 2, one parent has moved to another place, feelings are hurt or angry, it feels strange or dangerous; Stage 3, things have settled down, sun is out.) Point out that there can be a bright future for them as adults as seen in the big sun top the largest mountains in the distance. Options: Use the white board to acknowledge student contributions.

5. Introduce "different kids, different reactions" pages 7-8. These examples are designed to illustrate different temperaments and reactions. Discuss other ways different people might react during the first few months of separation and divorce. Other crises or major changes (a parent is in an auto accident, family has to move away, a family

member dies) also bring forth natural reactions which differ by personality and circumstance. Emphasize individualized responses to coping so students can accept their own pace and style.

6. Questions and Answers: Introduce the Question and Answer sections of the text. Student anxiety can be significantly lessened reading or discussing at least some of the questions and answers before the end of the first meeting. This information can provide a foundation for the classes that follow and produce fruitful discussions. Questions and Answers sets are on pages 9-11, (The oval section of questions followed by What's True and Not True); 32-35 (Questions and Answers-general topics); and 94-99 (Questions and Answers about the law and courts--always a favorite). Pages are short. Options: (a.) Students read each set silently followed by class discussion. (b) Teacher/counselor reads the questions on page 9 (in the oval at the top of the page), commenting that these are questions kids might ask themselves. Then continues through the "What's True" and "What's Not True" and the last paragraph on page 11 about how "not true thoughts can make you miserable..." The objective is to provide or reinforce key information in a non-threatening way. Discussion starters: "If you had to give advice to someone about their parents' separation or divorce, which of these questions and answers pages would you tell them to read first?"

Separate Notes and Newsprint: Students may still have questions but don't want to speak up in class. To protect student privacy, the students can write their own questions or comments on a piece of paper and hand it to the teacher/counselor. The Counselor can write these on a sheet of Newsprint either during this meeting or in time for the next meeting. The list of questions to answer (that are not answered in the text) should be posted at all subsequent meetings and the instructor should provide answers. Note: Issues or questions regarding parents who are rarely seen or absent are discussed on page 83-87.

5. Homework: (a) Pick two of the questions in the book or on the newsprint and come prepared with comments, further questions, or answers, and (b) Which "TIP" or "Words to Try" they liked so far.

MEETING 2

Stress, Feeling "Soup", Parents and Siblings (Part 1)

Objectives: To provide an easy to use and non-invasive explanation and structure for understanding emotions, mixed feelings, and the "fight or flight" state that can accompany major life changes, understand some of the family members reactions to divorce, identifying privately who they can trust and confide in, generate respect for each student and each student's family, and provide solutions and skill building opportunities in each area.

Materials:

Text: Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids, newsprint of (1) Agreement, (2) Questions to Answer, (3) Newsprint with empty pot of soup (should cover most of the page so students can write in names of feelings inside the pot); Whiteboard; colored markers; extra newsprint with colored markers; masking tape or pins to attach completed newsprint lists to wall or tack board; name tags; paper and pencils; snacks and drinks.

Procedures

1. Students discuss homework assignment and what they learned last week.

2. Add any Questions to the newsprint list

3. Stress, “Feeling Soup” (Text: Pages 11-16)

Divorce, like other major events, can be stressful, discouraging, or upsetting. Read aloud Pages 11-13. Discuss how different kids might react. Ask students to use any color marker and write in the Newsprint drawing of the pot the names of different feelings. Once they have filled in the names of different feelings, title the pot “Feeling Soup.” Mention the special role of “grieving” and that this is a natural response of our bodies and minds to losing something precious or very important. Grieving is nature’s way of helping us move on but it takes a while. It shouldn’t be hurried. Some students may mention the death of a relative and the feelings that they remember. Some students will not be aware of feelings, may not know how to label feelings, or may feel uncomfortable discussing them. Options: (a) Groups of students take on drawing symbols of feelings using colored felt tips on separate newsprint pages and a separate one for grief. (b) Teacher/counselor brings in a few pages of the “happy face” emotion list or a list of feelings/emotions by name.

Skill Building: Naming feelings and identifying the “feeling soup” experience is important to honoring emotions and then managing them. Pages 14-16 **“How to Feel Better Fast”** is an important list of action steps a student can consider. These are listed as a “TYB” (Train Your Brain) to encourage the reader to see the suggestions as tools. Read these aloud quickly and then return to the list and discuss how or why these steps work to feel better. Underscore that students may like some of these things to do this month but like other steps better another time. This is natural. Use several non-divorce related examples where a student may be upset, “maxed-out”, wanting revenge, discouraged, or stressed. Ask students to advise the person in each example from the text on what to try to feel better or be their best. End with students making their own private “Feel Good” list, in writing. They do not share this list with the class but refer to it when they want to feel better.

4. “Special Energy (Text Pages 16-23)

Describe the process of “special energy” – the effects of elevated levels of certain hormones in the body that lead to the fight or flight levels of enhanced strength and acuity when perceiving or fearing danger (includes the hormones of adrenaline and cortisol). This is “energy” that can be harnessed, something that successful athletes, performers, and competitors do exceedingly well. Over time students can also learn this. Since major family changes increases stress levels significantly and feelings of danger, a

discussion about the rise of “special energy” in an objective way can demystify the intense feelings. **Options:** Use non-divorce related examples. **Skill Building:** (“What To Do With Special Energy”, page 19-21) Read aloud and discuss the suggestions. Note the encouragement to (1) stay active physically as a way to manage any higher stress or discomfort level and (2) for the student to become more self-aware and learn the language of his or her body. Discuss what to do in situations where a student feels very anxious stressed or panicked—before a test, a big game, etc.

4. Parents and Siblings (Pages 23-31) This segment introduces the student to the feelings and actions of others close to them—parents, siblings, relatives, close friends without asking for personal examples of behaviors or attitudes. The student is asked to think about who he/she can talk to about sensitive things (pages 25-27). The student is not asked the name of the person they trust to speak to, but the class can talk in general terms about how they know an adult is trustworthy and how they would go about picking that person. This is a very important piece in forming judgments and should be revisited in following class periods. **Siblings:** Identify the ages of the siblings of the students. Read this section (pages 28-31) aloud about different ages of children and how big changes might affect them and what students their age can do to help. If time allows, cover the “Doing Things Together” section.

Homework:

- 1. Read over your feel good list before you leave the class and before you go to sleep tonight.**
- 2. If the student has a sibling, do something to help one sibling or at least observe how that sibling is acting.**
- 3. Read over pages 48-74**

Resource: for science minded students, they can search the internet for information on adrenaline, cortisol, and the limbic system.

Meeting 3

One Home or Two, Staying Connected, Parents (Part 2) and Other Changes

Objective: To facilitate discussions and plans on how to stay connected. To convey the messages (1) transitions are a family reorganization not a “broken home” or family disintegration, (2) that all family structures are valid and can work well, especially with family teamwork, (3) that staying in touch is important.

Materials:

Text: Mom’s House, Dad’s House for Kids, newsprint of (1) Agreement, (2) Questions to Answer, (3) Pot of soup with feelings written in from last meeting; additional newsprints from last week describing grief and feelings. Whiteboard; colored markers; extra newsprint with colored markers; masking tape or pins to attach newsprint to wall or tack board; name tags; paper and pencils; snacks and drinks

Procedures

1. Reports on homework:

- **Read over “Feel Good” list before left class and before sleep?**
- **If the student has a sibling, what was the observation or the assistance given?**
- **Read over pages 48-74?**

2. Questions or comments from last week: Add feelings to the Pot of Feeling Soup? To the newspapers describing grief and feelings? More questions to add to newspaper of questions? (This is a time for the teacher/counselor to start answer questions on the list.)

3. Ways to Stay Connected (Pages 48-52) Students should not feel pressured to discuss their deeper feelings about missing a parent. However, discussing the list of ways to stay connected can help them broaden their options. A student may read aloud the examples on page 51 and the group can discuss the example given.

Activity: Divide students into several groups. **Task:** create one example where parents and kids aren't very well connected and (1) come up with ideas on what to do better. (2)

4. One Home, Two Homes (Pages 52-74) Students were to read pages 52-54 as homework last week. . These sections cover many inter-related topics such as **Calendars and Schedules, Holidays, One Home, Two Homes, Making a New Home Homey, Rules, Going From One Home to Another, Checklists, Knowing Your Style of Settling In When You Arrive, and Going Back and Forth.** Since there are so many topics, ask the students to choose the ones they want to be sure and cover today. Options: Students form small groups based on the topic they want to discuss. Each small group may make a list of ideas or advice they'd give others on the topic.

Skill Building: There are many opportunities to build communication skills in these sections with “words to try” and checklists. The Calendars and Schedules section has an exercise. Look for the “Train Your Brain” symbol and “The Five Big Questions”. Discuss the Landing and Takeoff Pads, the Big Five Questions and ask for someone to act this out---where someone doesn't have a routine for arriving and leaving and where they do have one that works.

Homework:

Read, pages 36-45. to discuss what they think helps in these situations and what doesn't.

Meeting 4

The “Miserable Middle”, Finding Solutions

Objectives: To provide information about getting caught in “the middle” of adult arguments or issues and to suggest guidelines for removing themselves without guilt. To remind the student gently that adult issues, including the decision to divorce, are adult decisions. To provide a structure and a step by step process for framing problems or issues and ways to resolve them using small, manageable steps.

Emphasize: When parents put their child in the middle, it can feel like a tug of war inside. But, It is not the student’s responsibility to pick a side or resolve an issue between the parents. The parents’ issues are not the child’s fault or responsibility. A child is never to blame for adult decisions including separation and divorce. These are adult issues and tweens and even teens in college should not be drawn in. (Parental conflict is the most damaging when it includes the children or they witness or hear it. Therefore, giving the student information on how to withdraw from the conflict or tension is important.)

Materials:

Text: Mom’s House, Dad’s House for Kids, newsprint of (1) Agreement, (2) Questions to Answer, (3) Newsprint drawing with pot of soup and names of feelings written in from previous meetings. Whiteboard; colored markers; extra newsprint with colored markers; masking tape or pins to attach newsprint to wall or tack board; name tags; paper and pencils; snacks and drinks, copies of Problem Solving Forms (pages below) for each student.

Procedures

1. Students discuss homework assignment and what they learned last week.
2. More Questions to add to the list?
3. The “Miserable Middle” (pages 36-45) was assigned as reading homework last meeting. Students were asked to be ready to discuss what they thought helped and didn’t help. Discuss the examples and others the students volunteer. Elicit their ideas on “words to try” and actions to take. Emphasize that the adults own the problem and even when children feel bad, it doesn’t mean they are to blame or are responsible for making parents feel happy.

Skill Building: Boundaries. The student can begin to appreciate the fact that he/she is not responsible for adult matters. It is between the parents. Activities: role play some of the examples and the words to try or set up examples designed by the class. Ask for students to identify what is their problem and what belongs to the adult.

4. **Finding Solutions:** This meeting introduces three different approaches to finding solutions to problems and reaching goals. Students begin by reading pages 103-111, and pages 238-240. Discuss the examples and the process of the three approaches.

Cool Listening: Using the example on page 104, discuss the importance of feeling understood, even when people don’t agree with you. **Skill Building:** Ask for volunteers to re-create the example or another that the students choose. The

teacher/counselor acts as coach to the process. There are no blank forms available for this exercise but the teacher/counselor can copy the instructions from the text.

Solving the Puzzle. Go over the example on pages 238-240 and discuss how complaints and accusations can be reframed in a positive way. This is an important skill for life, work, and school. **Skill Building:** Distribute copies of the blank “The Prize Puzzle Pieces” (pages 241-242) and ask students to identify a goal and to follow each one of the steps given.

The Six-Step Solution: This process takes the most amount of time but it is well received. The structure engages the principles of consequences, barriers and options, action, and making adjustment. Read the example on page 233. Discuss the steps that David uses. **Skill Building:** Distribute Six Step Solution forms (pages 236-237). Students identify their own issue or goal **or** they work in small groups to identify an issue or goal and work on the steps as a team. The situation need not be divorce related. Coach the students through their process.

Homework: (a) Finish the problem solving exercise if it was not completed in class. If the problem solving process was being done in a group, email or phone another person in your group and attempt to complete it that way. Keep track of questions and frustrations. (b) Read Chapter 11, “Dreams and Goals”.

Meeting 5

Dreams and Goals

Objectives: To review last week’s assignments. To reframe daydreaming as a legitimate way to escape from uncomfortable feelings or thoughts but primarily to encourage daydreaming as the central source of their creative thinking. To encourage “dreaming” as a way to develop and achieve a goal and feel a sense of accomplishment and control.

Materials: Text: Mom’s House, Dad’s House for Kids, newsprint of (1) Agreement, (2) Questions to Answer, (3) Newsprint drawing of the pot of soup with names of feelings written in from previous meetings. Whiteboard; colored markers; extra newsprint with colored markers; masking tape or pins to attach newsprint to wall or tack board; name tags; paper and pencils; snacks and drinks, copies of Problem Solving Forms for each student. Copies of the form on page 212, two for each student on 8.5 x 11 papers.

Procedures:

1. Discussion of last week’s topics on “Miserable Middle” and the Solution exercises. Encourage students to share their solution processes with the class, or in dyads or small groups.

2. Dreams and Goals. Homework, read Chapter 11. This topic moves students towards learning how to set his/her own goals and encourages them to become actively involved

in dreaming, thinking, planning, eventually giving them a sense of control and mastery. This process can become a favorite and inspiring activity. Discuss the Chapter. Reinforce passages with reading aloud. Emphasize “Learning How To Bounce Back” and “How to Help Wishes and Dreams Come True”. Read Max’s example aloud noting ways he bounced back, and ways he could “train his brain” with high-fives and self congratulations when he reached small goals. **In pairs or small groups**, students discuss ways to “bounce back”, the “considerations” that Max had, emphasizing that things usually come one step or one piece at a time, not all at once. Draw a parallel between this step by step process and the problem solving process which is also step by step.

Skill Building: Distribute 2 copies of the form “One of My Dreams” to each student. Take quiet class time to ask each student to develop a dream. This exercise is very personal and may be too private to share. Give students permission to not share. For those who are willing to, ask them tell the class their dream and other items on the form. They may not complete it in class as it takes a good deal of thought. The second copy is for their private use.

Homework: Read: Friends and School, Parents (3), courts and family law 75-94, parents’ dating and a new kind of normal and 113-121.

Meeting 6

Parents Dating, The Family Team, and a New Kind of Normal

Objectives: To discuss parental behavior that surprises students and encourage a willingness to be an active family team member. To reinforce the skill building exercises and tips given throughout all the previous class meetings and to provide for a satisfying closing ritual that acknowledges everyone’s participation and role in making the class a success. For students who are interested in maintaining contact, provide them with paper, pencils so they can exchange emails and phone numbers.

Materials:

Text: Mom’s House, Dad’s House for Kids, newsprint of (1) Agreement, (2) Questions to Answer, (3) Newsprint drawing of the pot of soup with names of feelings written in from previous meetings. Whiteboard; colored markers; extra newsprint with colored markers; masking tape or pins to attach newsprint to wall or tack board; paper and pencils; snacks and drinks, index cards or small slips of paper if students want to exchange contact information, student evaluation forms (see content below).

Procedures

- 1. Questions or comments from last week and “Goals and Dreams”.**
- 2. Answer any questions still on the list.**
- 3. Friends and School:** Discuss the ideas on page 76-80, tips and words to try.
- 4. Parents:** Super busy parents, parents who are late or reschedule, who aren’t around much. Discuss what kids can do. Refer back to the “stay connected” ideas. Reinforce the

messages in the paragraphs titled, “Nobody’s Perfect”, “Parents Who Cry”, and “Parents Can Take Care of Themselves”. Ask what advice they would give to kids who were upset because a parent was crying.

5. The Family Team: Discuss the example of Ben and his sisters and ask for examples of families who work together to be a team. **Grandparents** are often integral parts of a child’s support system so it can be especially upsetting when there is conflict between parent and grandparent. **Skill Building:** refer back to the stay connected ideas on pages 49-52; Consider the words to try on pages 82-84, and when things get difficult, the “Feel Good List” and other ideas on the “Feel Better Fast” list, and to the guidelines for staying out of the middle.

6. Option: Courts and Legal Words: If students have not already covered this on their own, point to that part of the book and ask them to read it now silently. Answer questions.

7. Ending, A New Kind of Normal. Read aloud, page 120-121.

(Last 20 minutes of class. Options: Offer more snacks and drinks. Teacher/counselor gives a 5 minute review of the five meetings that went before and asks students to comment.

7 Student evaluations. Ask or pass out a paper that asks “Would you recommend this class to a friend?” “What would you like to have more of?” “What would you like to have less of?” “What did you like best?”

8. Closing Ritual: Last 10-15 minutes. Teacher/counselor shares his/her thoughts about everyone’s contribution making sure to mention every student’s contribution. Says what he/she will miss and hopes for. If appropriate, ask each student what good thing they will miss and what tips, ideas, words, or problem solvers they liked the best. **Option:** Ask students to all shake hands with one another and offer a “Thanks” for being a member of the group.

End

Permission to use or adapt this Lesson Plan is free.

Please contact DrRicci@isolinaricci.com