

PARENTING

Kids need help when parents split

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — If you're having trouble dealing with your separated spouse or your ex-spouse, think of what your children may be going through as well, noted Michele Hughes, a trained primary school counselor.

"I really don't think that parents start out with the intention of hurting their kids," she said.

But parents can allow their negative feelings for each other to spill over into their relationships with their children, she said. Being aware of that possibility is the first step a parent or parents can take in keeping their child from being hurt too much when parents split up, she said.

Hughes, a parishioner at Christ the King Church, was employed as a counselor from 1990-97 in the West Irondequoit School District, and is currently on child-care leave. As a counselor, she worked with support groups for children whose parents had separated, divorced or remarried. Hughes sees herself as an advocate for such children who are often left confused by their parents' antagonism toward one another, or by the entrance of a stepparent into their lives.

"The biggest thing we saw is they felt caught between (divorced) parents," she said.

For example, she said, sometimes a mother would ask her kid to ask daddy for his child support check. This might upset dad if the kid asked, or mom might get upset if the kid didn't ask.

"No matter what they did, they'd make somebody upset with them," she said.

Hughes and a colleague, Noreen Popivchak, also a school counselor in the same district, put together a workshop for parents and stepparents to help them better understand their children's plight during or after a divorce or remarriage. The workshop took place at the Hope 2001 conference at Guardian Angels Parish, Henrietta, March 31. The conference featured several presentations on such issues of personal loss as divorce and death, and drew 40 people.

Hughes talked about the themes discussed in her workshop during an interview in her home. Married with two children, she noted that the children of separated, divorced and remarried parents are no different than the children of couples who married once and stayed together.

"The child's job is to be a child, not to be the parent. To play soccer, to play tee-ball, to go to school."

Yet, the children of split-up parents often feel put upon to assume responsibility for their parents' problems, she said. For example, young children especially fantasize about bringing their parents back together. Such children may even go so far as to fake an illness or injure themselves in a misguided attempt to bring their parents back together via their mutual concern for their child, she said.

Children also need to be reassured that both parents love them always. Hughes urged non-custodial parents to spend as much time as possible with their children,

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Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Michele Hughes, with her two children, Analeigh, 3, and Lauryn, 11 months, at their home in Irondequoit April 5. Hughes has counseled children of divorced parents and shared her experience with others.

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tant." Another issue that can be problematic for split-up parents is differences in child-rearing approaches, she said. It's best if such parents work together on areas of agreement, and as far as possible, cooperate on child-rearing, she said. For example, they could attend a child's parent-teacher conferences together.

Meanwhile, they may explain to their children that they may have to follow different rules when they are in each parent's house.

Parents should ensure that school routines are organized well, since the often-avoidable shuttling from one house to another taxes children. Parents can ask a child's school officials to send out dual mailings of vital parent newsletters, she said, so both parents can be in sync when it comes to their kid's academic life.

As for stepparents, Hughes advised them to not rush into parenting their non-biological children. When possible, she said, let the biological parent do the disciplining. Stepparents should insist that children behave properly, of course, but be aware that a child needs to build a relationship first with a non-biological parent in order to live in harmony with him or her.

Most importantly, be aware that children are not armed with the maturity or reasoning ability to discern properly how to respond to a divorce or remarriage, she said.

"They're the littlest victims with the softest voices," she said.

and not shower them with expensive gifts designed to make up for a lack of time spent together.

"Material objects don't take the place of love," she said. "On the outside, (kids are) thrilled they're getting all these things, but on the inside what they want is time alone with the parent or special time with the parent."

Parents can do a lot to make the lives of their children easier during or after a divorce or remarriage, she said. For one thing, it's best not to fight too much in front of the child or talk down the other parent in front of or within earshot of a kid. However, if you do argue in front of a child, make sure such a kid also sees you reconcile, she said.

"It's not that parents shouldn't have disagreements in front of kids, it's that the kids should see that their parents can have solutions ...," Hughes said. "(Otherwise), they just see the argument, they don't see the resolution and this is just as impor-

Family Events

FRI, APR. 13 — Registration deadline: for Apr. 28 workshop "Finding Your Career Path" for girls in grades 6-12; sponsored by Girl Scouts of Genesee Valley and Bryant & Stratton Career College, Greece Campus, Bryant & Stratton, 150 Bellwood Dr., Rochester; 8:45 a.m.-1 p.m.; \$5; call M. Catherine Thran 716/239-7922.

SAT, APR. 14 — Storytime: for 3-5 year olds; Children's Center, Central Library of Rochester & Monroe County, 115 South Ave., Rochester; 10-10:30 a.m.; 716/428-8150.

APR. 16-20 — School break "It's Raining Cats and Dogs!"; fun with an animal theme — identify mystery animal tracks, collect recipes for dog & cat treats, make a bird in a cage and other pet crafts, enjoy juggling by Just Foolin' Around; Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; Mon.-Thurs. 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Fri. 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; adults \$6, seniors \$5, ages 3-17 \$4, under 3 free; 716/263-2700.

APR. 16-20 — Fling Into Spring; learn about cardinals, robins and chickadees; Rochester Museum & Science Center, 657 East Ave., Rochester; 10 a.m.-4 p.m., free with museum admission; 716/271-4552, ext. 342.

APR. 16-20 — Shows view film "Dolphins" or find out what life as an astronaut is like in "Space Station Alpha"; Strasenburgh Planetarium, 657 East Ave., Rochester; 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; \$6 adults, \$4 children; 716/271-4552, ext. 411.

TUE, APR. 17 — Puppet show: Chris Grom's Breezy Heights Puppet Theater; for ages 3-7; Helen McGraw Branch, Irondequoit Public Library, 2180 E. Ridge Rd., Irondequoit; 2 p.m.; free; to register call 716/396-6060.

APR. 18, 25 — Cool Kids on Campus; Apr. 18: Magic Mini Camp with magician Bill Gormont; Apr. 25: Slime & Funny Putty; Fireside Lounge, Seymour Union, SUNY at Brockport; Residence Dr., Brockport; 7 p.m.; free; 716/395-5607.

SAT, MAY 5 — Children's show: "Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse"; presented by The Kennedy Center; Nazareth College Arts Center, 4245 East Ave., Rochester; 11 a.m. & 2 p.m.; \$9; 716/389-2170.

Register: for girls' June 25-29 soccer and July 16-20 basketball camps; Our Lady of Mercy High School, 1437 Blossom Rd., Rochester; \$100 per camp; for information and registration forms call 716/288-7120.

Register: for July 8-12 Ten Star All Star Basketball Camp; boys ages 8-19, girls ages 10-19; Roberts Wesleyan College, 2301 Westside Dr., N. Chili; \$499; players selected by invitation only; for evaluation form call 704/568-6801.

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