

Kids First Center By Marnelle K. Grumbach

“Our kids will be happy if we’re happy.” But the truth is, for most divorcing families, the children involved are unhappy and can suffer emotional trauma.

Although the dictionary defines divorce as “the legal dissolution of a marriage,” it is also defined as “a complete or radical severance of closely connected things.” For any married couple with children, divorce is more than just moving out and moving on. Children are all too often stuck in the middle, left to suffer great emotional loss, confusion, and anger. The Kids First Center on St. John Street in Portland fills a gap in the social services available in Maine.

The center’s name says it best. “We’re not pro-moms, or pro-dads. We’re pro-kids,” says Executive Director Peg Libby. With programs ranging from a four-hour co-parenting class to support groups and programs designed specifically for moms, step-parents, dads, women, gay/

lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered families, the Kids First Center reaches out to everyone involved in a divorce. But the focus of every program remains on kids.

Kids First is the only agency in Maine whose sole mission focuses on the issues of divorce and separation. Each year over 7000 divorces are filed in Maine. Neither the legal system nor the mental health system is equipped to provide affordable support resources to separating or divorcing parents. Before Kids First began in 1998, The Center for Grieving Children in Portland, which helps children deal with the trauma associated with death, reported turning away families going through divorce or separation who were looking for help or guidance. A survey of school guidance counselors in the greater Portland area found that divorce is not just *a* problem for kids, it is *the* problem.

“Even well-intentioned, caring parents may not be aware of

how their children are being scarred,” said Libby. Through co-parenting classes known as the Kids First Program (often mandated by family court), parents learn to put their children’s needs first.

This class is held twice monthly in Portland and is also available in Augusta, Biddeford, Farmington, Lewiston, Rumford, South Paris, Topsham, Unity, Waterville, and York.

Children and adolescents share their experiences and learn positive coping skills in support groups. Parents can continue in The Next Step program, which is a six-week group program facilitated by mental health professionals for those who wish ongoing support and self-help. Legal professionals involved in a divorce case often can tell from the outset whether or not the family is a “Kids First Family.”

Susan Lieberman and her two children, ages nine and thirteen, recently completed the Kids First program. “Kids First gave my kids new vocabulary. They were able to verbalize all of their sad feelings and understand that they weren’t the only kids going through this. They realized that they weren’t alone anymore,” she said.

Barbara Freethy, a pediatric therapist and a spokesman for Kids First, says that a primary goal for the organization is to not only educate parents, but also to teach professionals more about how to work with this population. “Working with families in divorce is very stressful. We are trying to build awareness of our resources so that more and more professionals will also consider putting kids first, which is all part of advocating for the child.”

“Every program we design is with children in mind and is created to consider the child’s perspective of divorce or separation. Our resources are not just avail-



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able to families, but are open to lawyers, family therapists, clergy and other professionals that are working with divorcing couples and their children,” Libby said.

Kids First’s workshops and conferences are designed to have a multi-disciplinary appeal. Workshops offered include Healthy Legal Divorce Options, Divorce and the Adolescent, and Financially Surviving Divorce. Last year clergy, day care providers, school social workers, guidance counselors, police officers, and legal professionals attended the annual conference.

Kids First also recognizes Portland’s increasing diversity and plans to research the issues and needs regarding divorce within other cultures. “We are in the very initial stages, but we are planning to hold focus groups to learn what divorce and separation means for multiple populations in and around Portland,” said Libby. In addition, the center recognizes the challenges that stepfamilies face and is addressing that with a new program.

“I like to think of us as a preventative agency. We have more and more people coming in for help before they even make the decision to divorce, or before they tell their kids. We are also urging other professionals to work proactively with families to help prevent the effects of divorce on children,” she added.

Last year Kids First programs helped nearly 3000 people. For more information about programs or volunteering, visit www.kidsfirstcenter.org or call 207-761-2709.

Photos Courtesy of KIDS FIRST CENTER