



# 'It really does work!'

Is it possible to protect your children from the damaging effects of divorce? Three British families struggling to cope with marriage breakdown travelled to Texas to visit a specialist 'divorce coach'. The results, says Lucy Atkins, were remarkable

**M**ost of us are painfully aware, in this age of superman-nies, tiny tearaways and teenage boot camps, that parents can seriously harm their children's mental health. Research has shown that we damage our children with particular efficiency when we get divorced.

About 40% of marriages in the UK end in divorce, and more than one in four children will live through their parents' divorce before they are 16 years old. About 60% of fathers lose contact with their children within three years of divorcing. Studies show that these children are more likely to suffer from insecurity and anxiety, are less likely to achieve academically, are more prone to substance abuse and teenage pregnancy, and are more likely to become divorced themselves. That is some knock-on effect.

The majority of child psychologists agree, however, that it is not divorce per se that messes up children. It is how we handle it that really matters. Most divorcing couples are too busy dealing with their own traumas to tackle effectively, or systematically, the impact their split is having on their offspring. Even those desperate to do it "right" may struggle to find appropriate guidance or support. Our legal system is currently hands-off: the government-funded body Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcas) intervenes in particularly volatile situations, but elsewhere it is largely down to individuals, perhaps with help from social workers, counselling organisations such as Relate or charities such as Parentline Plus.

In contrast, in many parts of the US

down) the state is hands-on when it comes to children of divorce. In 38 of the 50 states in the US, divorcing parents are routinely court-ordered to attend some form of "child-focused mediation", usually a one-off, four-hour seminar that the parents must pay for themselves. If the situation is deemed "high-conflict", they may be referred to a "divorce coach" for more intensive work.

The coaches teach these warring and bruised parents how to put aside their own baggage and focus on the emotional welfare of their children. They provide practical strategies for doing this, and, crucially, often work with the children directly. In a Channel 4 series, beginning this Tuesday, three British families affected by divorce are shipped off to Houston, Texas to spend time with the divorce coach Christina McGhee, a social worker who runs seminars and workshops for divorcing parents and their children, many of whom are referred to her by the courts. The results are dramatic.

**The Walkers**  
**Angela, 29, a holistic therapist and Kelvin, 40, a computer engineer, from Cheltenham**

"We'd spent most of the last two years screaming and shouting at each other," says Angela, "I was desperate - I felt as if I was in prison at home all day with three kids and eventually realised the only way anything was going to change was if I took matters into my own hands." Angels packed up the kids, Callum, now eight, Eanna, six, and Honey, three, and left her husband, Kelvin, in the summer of 2004.

Once separated, however, the situation between Angela and Kelvin deteriorated further. "We were at each others'

they pass them to and fro ("If it wasn't in the book, it wasn't said.") What is more, they never, ever bad-mouth each other in front of their children. "It really does work," says Angela, "It hasn't always been easy but it's a huge improvement."

"These days Callum, Eanna and Honey are 'so much happier'," says Angela, "They don't feel they have to choose between us any more." Honey stopped demanding her bottle and is back on the potty. Callum is more outgoing and his school work is improving, and Eanna is much more settled. "Christina gave us an enormous dose of common sense," says Kelvin. "If we'd had the coaching from the beginning we would never have hit those problems in the first place - they were almost all avoidable."

Perhaps most miraculously of all, last year the Walkers spent Christmas Day together. "Six months ago Angela and myself couldn't spend half an hour in the same room without fighting," says Kelvin, "yet we were able to spend 12 hours on the most stressful day of the year without a cross word. Now that's a result."

**The Butlers**  
**Sue Butler, 38, is a marketing assistant from West Hoathley, Sussex**

Sue took her two children, Will, eight, and Franni, 10, to Texas on her own, because her ex-husband, Rupert, did not want to participate. She was not sure whether it would work without him, but she was desperate enough to try. Four years ago Rupert left Sue after eight years of marriage. He now lives in the Netherlands with a new girlfriend, Donna. "Last year the situation was awful," Sue remembers "I was putting Will, then seven, on the plane to visit

home distraught because he missed his dad so much. I didn't know what to do to console him."

Will was having trouble at school. "He'd isolate himself, stand on his own at play time," while Franni, then nine, had stopped seeing her dad at all, and was refusing to admit this could be problematic. "It was breaking my heart," says Sue, "I was about to cut Rupert out entirely. I felt I was banging my head against a brick wall." When they set off for Texas they had all "reached rock bottom."

"The first group session was amazing," says Sue. "I learned so much in just four hours. I realised I was holding on to my daughter - deep down I didn't want her to go to Holland, and all the time I was blaming him."

One-on-one coaching sessions with Christina showed Sue how to help her son. "She showed me that although I can't replace Will's father, I can make a big difference by spending regular time with him, just the two of us." Every other Saturday Sue now spends the day with Will on his own. "The two of us just hanging out doing stuff he likes, like PlayStation." She also now waves him off at the airport with a smile, giving him "permission" to go, rather than showing how upset she is.

The children also attended several group coaching sessions without their parents. "These sessions really helped Franni to understand her own emotions," says Sue. "She realised she was refusing to go to Holland because she wanted to protect me, and be 'loyal'." Nowadays, says Sue, Will is "a lot more expressive".

Franni, meanwhile, has started visiting her dad again. "It helped me a lot," says Franni, "because it told me what to do when I'm feeling sad. Me and Dad have a closer relationship now because I get to see him more."



absolutely life-changing," says Sue. "It's been the end to a horrible chapter. A year ago I felt Rupert was a major part of my life. Now he's a very small part of it. It has allowed me to move on."

**The Hibberts**  
**Colin, 40, is a contract manager for a demolition contractor and Tara, 36, is a reiki healer. They live in Banstead, Surrey**

"You look at the kids and think, 'My god what am I doing to them?'" says Tara. "I never thought we'd divorce, ever. You feel so guilty." Their children, Keira, now eight, and Aidan, seven, were born 10 months apart. "After Aidan was born the relationship started to dwindle. Looking after the two of them nearly put me in a straitjacket," she says. "Colin and I never argued – that was probably one of our biggest problems – but I knew it wasn't right."

"It was a very controlled situation," says Colin. "There was no conflict. We got on really well, but Tara told me she didn't love me in the right way any more." All of a sudden, after 13 years of marriage, he found himself facing the loss of his best friend, wife, children and home: "Everything," he says, "I've worked my whole life for." And he was terrified. "When you know you might lose your kids it's the most devastating thing in the world."

Their main concern was how to protect the children. "We were desperate for help," says Colin. In the meantime, they simply kept going as if nothing was wrong. Not surprisingly, Keira and Aidan were picking up on the tension. Aidan, then six, was particularly angry. "We were being called in to the school to be told he wasn't concentrating and was disruptive," says Tara. "He was upset and sad, but he didn't know why."

During the coaching sessions Christina pointed out that since Colin and Tara rarely argued, and still did everything as a family, the situation was actually very confusing. "I realised then that I had to move out," says Colin. When they announced the divorce, Aidan was openly upset and Keira, says her mum, just wouldn't take it on board. "She couldn't even use the words 'splitting up' – she had to use hand gestures."

The coaching, says Tara, "helped us learn that we had to explain that just because Mummy and Daddy are splitting up, it doesn't mean we won't love you any more." This came blindingly

**Happy ever afters ... above, from l-r: Kelvin and Angela Walker; Sue and Rupert Butler; Colin and Tara Hibbert. Below, from top: Rupert and Franni; Eanna and Callum Walker; the Hibberts' daughter, Keira**



obvious, but, Tara points out, "Your children don't necessarily believe you when you say this – after all, I said I loved Colin, and that turned out to be a lie, so the same could go for them. It was really valuable having a third party to reinforce this message to them."

In the children's sessions Christina taught Aidan ways to deal with his anger, how to run round the garden, or punch a pillow, or simply tell his parents how he feels. "He's more balanced and he loves school now," says Tara. Keira "no longer has to use hand gestures in place of the word 'divorce'".

The coaching also showed Colin and Tara how to protect their children from the inevitable wrangling over money and housing. "We keep a cool head," says Colin, "and always keep stressful things like finances and arrangements separate from the most precious things in our lives, the kids." As a result, Keira and Aidan appear to be coming through the divorce unscathed. "They are not withdrawn or troubled, and when they're upset, they talk to us," says Colin. "We talk openly about the future, now, instead of shutting it off." The coaching, he says, was "priceless". "It has given us the satisfaction of knowing that we are not damaging our kids."

**Divorcing and in need of help?**

Relate offers counselling to divorcing couples and has recently launched UTalk, a free advice service for children whose parents are divorcing (0845 456 1310; relate.org.uk).

Parentline Plus offers advice, information and support to all divorcing couples (0808 800 222; www.parentline-plus.org.uk)

National Family Mediation Service is a network of non-profit mediation services in England and Wales, helping divorcing couples to reach joint decisions about children, finance and property. They can also provide specialist services for children (01392 271 610; www.nfm.u-net.com)

Christina McGhee's websites are at www.divorceandchildren.com and www.lemons2lemonade.com

*How To Divorce Without Screwing Up Your Children, a three-part series, starts on Tuesday, January 31 at 9pm on*