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April 16, 2007

Lemons into lemonade... delivered with zest

Better parenting when families split – what every family lawyer should know

Christina McGhee – London Friday 16 March

Christina McGhee is one of the US' leading divorce coaches and parent co educators. She recently featured in the UK TV documentary series 'How to divorce without screwing up your kids'. Over the years she has educated thousands of divorcing American parents and for a week in March this softly spoken but formidable Texan was in England to teach us something.



Christina's raison d'être is about helping children – exploring the pitfalls for separating families with the emphasis on the needs of children when parents separate. In her State of Texas divorcing couples are routinely required to attend parenting classes as they embark upon divorce proceedings.

The program offers insight into how children are directly impacted by divorce and gives parents the opportunity to develop new communication and co-parenting skills when dealing with the ex spouse/partner. It reinforces the need for children to maintain a strong relationship/connection with both parents and both homes.

The idea that 70 or so of the locality's separating parents are required to attend a 4 hour program in a municipal building may seem to us at best novel and at worst unworkable but the experiences and post-program evidence suggests the contrary. A survey of 9,876 post-program parents showed

- 91% rated the class as worthwhile
- 94% agreed that it helped them to understand the impact of divorce on their children
- 92% increased understanding of why parent cooperation is important
- 90% increased appreciation for children having a meaningful relationship with both parents
- 92% felt they received effective communication skills to use with ex and children
- 91% stated desire to make a stronger effort to work with their ex-spouse
- 91% would recommend to other separating and divorcing parents

A pretty strong endorsement and certainly something for us to think about on this side of the pond.

As practitioners Christina was able to give us greater insight into the range of emotions and possible actions of our clients and separately their children. For those of us fortunate enough to hear her we came away with some additional skills and techniques to help our clients help their children.

What became clear throughout the day is that there are times when we need to refer clients to other professionals; identifying when and in what circumstances to bring in other professionals is key. (Resolution has identified this need and has put in place a training course for IFAs, it is anticipated that further training for other family justice professionals will follow.)

Suggesting that our clients may need counselling or support can sometimes be difficult for us. Christina (a self-confessed lover of analogies) suggested the following;

'you're on a plane and the flight attendant explains the procedure – if there is a loss of cabin pressure oxygen masks will descent. The instructions are clear – if you're travelling with children put your own mask on before attending to your children.' If you pass out you cannot care for your children.

Simple but effective – explaining that in order to help their children clients need to 'put their own mask on first' and get support and helping themselves really does work.

Christina hosts an online resource www.divorceandchildren.com and created the award winning children's DVD/workbook 'Lemons 2 lemonade; How to handle life when things go sour between Mum and Dad'. I bought a copy and watched it with my 7 year old son – it was engaging and made a lot of sense. It is an excellent piece of work and I cannot commend it highly enough. It could be the best £15 some of our clients spend.

If she comes back for another whirlwind Resolution tour be sure not to miss her.

The DVD can be purchased through Family Law in Partnership. The cost is £15 including P&P. Please email aw@flip.co.uk or af@flip.co.uk with your full postal or DX address.

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