

With divorce at epidemic levels, a new TV series tries to help families who split to break up with the least possible damage to the children.

DAVID THOMAS finds out how they fared



Saturday morning in Houston, Texas, finds Christina McGhee coping with another crowd of unhappy customers. But their lack of enthusiasm is hardly her fault. For Christina, a perfectly groomed, all-American blonde, works as a coach and counsellor for couples who plan to get divorced.

In common with 38 of America's 50 states, Texas requires would-be divorcees to attend classes advising them how to minimise the damage their split does to their children. Partners who hate each other are forced to pay \$50 (roughly £28) to sit together in a room, listening to a four-hour lecture.

Christina does not let her audience off lightly. 'Do you hate your ex more than you love your children?' she asks bluntly. 'Parent-conflict is one of the biggest factors in how children are going to fare. Children have every right to enjoy a happy relationship with their mum and dad. Parents have a responsibility to support their children's relationship with the other parent to the best of their ability. This is gonna be hard for you. And it's gonna be hard for your kids.'

So it's easy to understand why many of the audience begin the marathon session in a surly, cynical mood. And yet, by lunchtime, their feelings are very different.

'All the people in there were crying,' says Colin Hibbert, a 40-year-old construction manager. 'They'd realised the damage they'd done. People left there with their heads down, thinking, 'I've made my kids' lives a misery.'" Colin

has attended Christina's session because he, too, is getting divorced, from his wife, Tara, 36. Yet the Hibberts are not Texan, but English. They have come to America, along with two other British couples, as participants in a new Channel 4 documentary series, *How To Divorce Without Screwing Up Your Children*.

The producer of the three-part series, Sam Whittaker, believes that we pay far too little attention to the effect that our national divorce epidemic is having on our children. 'One in four children goes through a divorce before the age of 16,' Whittaker says. 'We know about the impact of divorce on them: anxiety, insecurity, low self-esteem; a greater likelihood of abusing alcohol and drugs; poorer performance at school; an increased chance of getting divorced themselves.'

'As a society, we need to do something about it, just like the Americans. If the dangers of divorce for children are so manifest, it's in the interests of the state to help children through it so that they don't become a burden to the state five or eight years down the line.'

Research suggests that the real harm done to children by divorce comes not from the split itself, but from all the acrimony that surrounds it. Parents who use children as weapons in their own conflict do far more harm than those who try to maintain a civilised relationship.

To test whether it was possible to teach parents to limit the damage of divorce, Whittaker set about finding three families to act as guinea pigs. But he was not looking for the sort of exhibitionists most reality-TV producers

crave. 'All the parents we considered were psychologically assessed,' he explains. 'We didn't want anyone who actively wanted to be on TV. It was more a case of parents saying, "We will come with you in exchange for the help on offer." We also rejected a number of families because we felt that the parents would use the programme as a platform to get back at their ex-partner through the kids.'

He ended up with three couples, each of whom had very different perspectives on

Counsellor Christina McGhee, top left; Rupert Butler with his son, Will, now seven, below



'Colin is walking around like a man who has just had a large, toxic custard pie shoved in his face'

divorce. The only common denominator, coincidentally but perhaps significantly, was that all three women had suffered from severe postnatal depression, which had wreaked havoc on their relationships.

In the case of Tara and Colin Hibbert, it is Tara who is initiating the divorce. 'I'm going to blow the family apart. Hopefully, it will be a small, controlled explosion that we can get over. It's not a decision I've taken lightly. It's something I've thought about for years.'

'People say you've got to put your kids first. But when I had them, I didn't give up the right to my life. I've got to be selfish and think of me. If I'm happy, it will benefit them in the long run. It's got to.'

Colin, meanwhile, is walking around like a man who has just had a very large, very toxic custard pie shoved in his face. 'I've lost my wife, my best friend, my children and everything I've ever worked for,' he says. 'There's nothing left to lose. I'm gutted, really gutted.'

Yet both the Hibberts are united in their determination to do the best for their children, Keira, seven, and Aidan, six. Their interests will come first. As Tara later tells me, she doesn't want to go the way of other couples she knows.

'I've had friends go through their divorces screaming at each other, and it affects the children,' she says. 'I had a friend who split up with her husband three years ago. She was vile to

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him in front of the children. I said to her, "This isn't doing the children any good." She just said, "I don't care. They need to see what their father's like."

"But when you've got children you're always in each other's lives, no matter what. You can either try being amicable and making life as easy as possible, or you can hate each other and make life hell. With Colin I thought, let's try and make it bearable."

For Sue Butler, mother of Franni, ten, and Will, seven, the situation is very different. She and her ex-husband Rupert, 38, who works for Shell, split four years ago. Now he lives in Holland with his new girlfriend, Donna.

Sue, 38, can't cope with Rupert's apparent indifference to his children. Will only sees his father once a month, flying to Holland by himself. Franni refuses to go at all.

"I don't know how I can make things better," Sue says. "I feel Rupert should be involved more in their lives. But I speak to Rupert and he says, "I don't see that there's any problem."

Sue is hoping that the trip to Houston will help build bridges between Rupert and his children — but then Rupert decides that he isn't coming along after all.

He cannot, or will not, admit that there's a problem. 'I don't think the kids are unhappy,' he insists. 'I regularly ask them both if they're happy and they say they're fine.' So far as he is concerned, all Christina McGhee has to offer is American psychobabble: why fly thousands of miles just for that?

'I've got a very hectic next few months and I have my relationship with Donna to think about,' Rupert declares. 'That's not more important than the kids, but it's definitely equally important.'

The third couple, Angela and Kelvin Walker, have emerged from a hellish relationship. Their children, Callum, eight, Eanna, six, and Honey, two, have witnessed constant, screaming rows. 'We hated each other,' Angela, 29, says bluntly. 'The only communication we had was shouting at each other. Kelvin tried to strangle me. I hit him and tried to stab him.'

Their mutual hostility is the one subject on which the Walkers agree. 'We had to separate or we'd have killed each other,' says Kelvin, 40. 'I have to swallow everything down and say, "Fine", or I'll be digging a deep trench in the patio and putting Angela's body into it.'

Not surprisingly, Callum has become aggressive at school, while Eanna throws tantrums. The children are miserable. As Callum says, 'I want to ask Mum and Dad, "Why are you growing apart?" because I'm leading a very sad life.'

While Sam Whittaker's cameras look on, all the couples meet Christina in England or (in Rupert Butler's case) Holland. They then travel to Houston to attend her seminar, as well as a number of private counselling sessions, as couples and individuals. Their children, too, attend classes on coping with their parents' divorces.

Seven months on from the series being filmed, all the couples are convinced that they and their children benefited from the experience. Even the battling Walkers have learned to take a calmer, more ordered approach to the way they behave as parents.

As Sam Whittaker observes, 'Although the conflict within the Walkers' marriage was very, very intense, their capacity to understand the impact on their children and their desire to change was impressive. They prove that no matter how bad or conflicted your circumstances are, there are still things you can do. They are finding a way to separate in a businesslike manner, and the business in hand is their kids.'

For the Hibberts, Christina's advice did not



Ten tips for parenting after divorce

1 Avoid conflict in front of your child at all costs. Contact between parents can be a breeding ground for open warfare, so arrange for transfers to take place in a neutral setting. Make sure your child is not within listening range when telephone conversations are being held with the other parent. Use written communication, faxes or email to share information with your child's other parent.

2 Be supportive of the other parent's role in your child's life. Just because your ex wasn't a good partner, it doesn't mean they can't be a good parent. Speak positively about the other parent to your child whenever possible. (If you can't say anything positive, don't say anything.)

3 Establish a business relationship, with your ex, focused on the best interests of your child. You both have a lifelong investment in the wellbeing of your child. If you're having difficulty separating your emotions from the situation, ask yourself how you would handle a similar situation with a colleague. Alternatively, think how you would want the situation handled if the roles were reversed.

4 Never bad-mouth, judge or criticise your ex in front of your child. When disagreements occur, handle them with integrity and honour. Use statements such as, 'That's not the way I see it', or 'I have a different opinion about what Mum or Dad said'.

5 If your ex criticises you, don't retaliate or try to set the story

straight with your child. Trying to give your child your side of the story will only add to their confusion. When one parent denigrates another, they are destroying their own relationship with that child. Your child will respect you for honouring their relationship with their other parent.

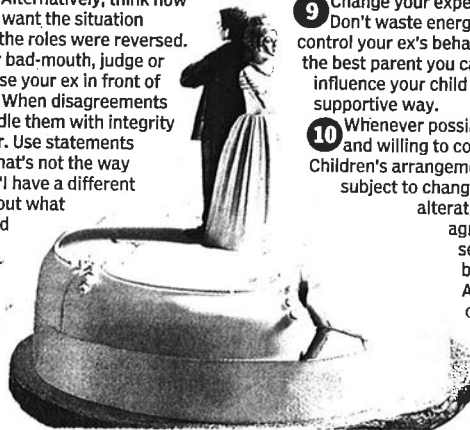
6 Strive to resolve negative feelings towards your ex-spouse. Moving forward is important for you and your child. If you are having difficulty doing so, find some help.

7 Whenever negative feelings about the divorce or your ex occur, handle them in a healthy, adult way. Use friends, family members or a trusted professional to vent your feelings. Be sure that your child is not capable of overhearing your conversation.

8 Control your anger. If you find yourself reacting to something your ex has said or done, give yourself time to sort through your feelings and cool off. Instead of waging a personal attack, stay focused on addressing the issues.

9 Change your expectations. Don't waste energy on trying to control your ex's behaviour. Just be the best parent you can and strive to influence your child in a nurturing, supportive way.

10 Whenever possible, be flexible and willing to compromise. Children's arrangements are always subject to change, so be open to alterations to plans or agreements that serve your child's best interests. Also, inform the other parent about school functions and special events.



make them change their ways so much as underline that they were trying to do the right thing. It also reassured their children.

'The kids thought Christina was lovely,' says Tara. 'Aidan and Keira had both asked me, "Because you don't love Daddy, does that mean you don't love me?" Christina stepped in and said, "Mum will always love you." That confirmed it for them.'

'The classes in Houston taught the kids to deal with their emotions. They learned, "You will get angry, but there are ways of sorting that anger out. You will be upset, and this is how to deal with that."

'The effects were pretty much immediate,

especially with Keira. Before Houston, Keira couldn't accept that we were splitting up. She didn't want to talk about it. But after she'd been to the classes, there was a transformation. She was no longer frightened of asking questions.'

But it is Sue and Rupert Butler's relationship that has changed most of all. After Rupert refused to go to Houston, Christina visited him in Holland. She took a videotape, showing his son William in Texas, asking, 'Why isn't Daddy here?' The effect was dramatic. Rupert broke down in tears.

'Things are brilliant now,' says Sue. 'Rupert has changed. He tells the children, "You are the most important thing in my life." In the past, it

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was always a case of me phoning him and asking when was he going to see the kids, and him saying, "I'll get back to you." He fitted us in around his life. But now I don't have to worry about it. For the next three months I know when they're going to be staying with him. He doesn't control my life any more.'

But Sue, too, has been forced to confront some uncomfortable truths. 'I was focused on myself for 18 months after the split. You think the kids will just fit in. Christina makes you aware of how the children are feeling. I thought, "Will's only three. He doesn't know what's going on." But obviously he did.'

The sessions in Houston also helped the Butler children express their true emotions. 'The children were told it was okay to be upset,' says Sue. 'For the first time, Will starts crying about it and asking, "Why did Daddy leave?" It was brilliant that he could say these things.'

Christina's counselling made Sue realise that she had not done all she could to help her daughter, Franni to see her father. As she now admits, 'I was happy that my daughter was staying at home with me.'

Whenever Sue had said goodbye to her children at the airport, she let her sadness show. 'Although I didn't cry, Franni picked up on how I was feeling. No wonder she didn't want to go; she didn't want to upset me. Now I give her acceptance. I say, "Have a good time," and she's pleased to go.'

'I said to Christina, "What can I do to make it easier for Will?" She said I had to start doing things he wants to do, like going on the Play-Station. It sounds so simple, but I've never done "boy" things before — I'd go riding or shopping with my daughter. Now I spend whole days with Will and it makes a huge difference.'

Nothing that Christina says is emotional rocket science. But that's the point. 'Her advice is so practical,' says Sue Butler. 'You often can't see the wood for the trees. But when you tell her about a situation, she'll give you an answer: "This is what you have to do." You say, "Yes! Why didn't I think of that?" It's absolutely brilliant.'

Tara Hibbert agrees. In fact, she'd like to follow in Christina's footsteps. 'I'd love to do something like that,' she says. 'People need to think of their children more. They understand a lot more than we give them credit for.' And many divorcing parents, sadly, understand a lot less than they're prepared to admit.

How To Divorce Without Screwing Up Your Children starts Tuesday, Channel 4, 9pm.

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