

PACT Helps Parents Make Divorces Civil

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From Pasadena Star-News, Tuesday, Sept. 3, 2002

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PASADENA --- The 125 glum faces in the Pasadena Courthouse jury assembly room one recent evening were summoned not to judge another person's actions but to contemplate their own.

As parents who recently had filed for divorce, each had been ordered to individually attend Parents & Children Together, a mandatory court-run program that operates countywide.

As they watched a video about the negative impacts divorce can have on children and listened to a local marriage counselor explain ways to get kids out of the crossfire, their tired, teary eyes brightened and the mandatory workshop became more like a cross between "Divorce Court" and "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

"I have a 7-year-old son who is banging his head on the wall," confided one mother as the audience groaned in sympathetic unison.

"I have a daughter who is 7 who feels it's her responsibility to get us back together," another mom volunteered.

Victor Medina, 50, of West Covina stood: "This is my second divorce, and if I had had this course the first time, I wouldn't have been such a jerk," he admitted.

Court officials, attorneys and marriage counselors say Medina and other divorcing parents are witnessing a wave of new programs and services designed to shift custody disputes from the courtroom to the dining room table.

"We're trying very hard from all different angles to get parents working together in the beginning," said Lily Ko-Lee, the county's clinical supervisor of Family Court Services.

She said there is now a Family Law Information Center downtown, a fast-track evaluation process that helps families establish custody arrangements in one day, and other programs and resources:

- Parents locked in heated divorce battles are being sent to counseling programs like "Channels of Understanding" and "Parenting Without Conflict".
- The Los Angeles County Bar Association invited divorce attorneys and their clients two months ago to a "Settlerama."
- And a small network of marriage counselors, therapists, money managers and an attorney are forming the San Gabriel Valley's first collaborative divorce network.

Under Collaborative Divorce, a relatively new concept found in half the states in the country, attorneys agree to leave the case if they can't resolve everything outside the courtroom.

"Attorneys are realizing that by fighting in court for an hour a week of custody, they're doing more damage than good," said South Pasadena marriage counselor Mary Ann Aronsohn, who teaches at PACT and Channels and is a member of the fledgling collaborative divorce group (www.nocourtdivorce.com).

She cites collaborative divorce as the third major wave of change in divorce in California—the first two being the no-fault divorce law more than 30 years ago and the second being the 1981 doctrine making it mandatory to see a mediator before court.

But Aronsohn says she's having trouble finding attorneys in the San Gabriel Valley willing to participate, perhaps because the fees aren't as high. Collaborative divorce attorneys typically get a \$1,000 retainer—compared to \$5,000 to \$10,000 in typical divorces—and including billable hours walk away with a total of \$3,000 per spouse compared with \$10,000 to \$25,000.

However, Pasadena attorney Carolyn Makupson, a former school principal, says she's ready to join. She says that, like a lot of attorneys, she's tired of watching parents fight over petty matters at their children's expense.

Court officials say this is why they're trying to make the courthouse more a place for peace than war.

“By coming up with various programs, we would like to make the court process one that heals people and helps them go on with their lives rather than one that feeds the hurt feelings and exacerbates the anger,” said Margaret Little, a manager in the court's family law department.

Officials say such planning is critical to avoid having a judge—a stranger to the family—decide how their lives should be run.

Divorce judges are “making life decisions (more significant than) what we do with criminal cases,” said Pasadena Supervising Superior Court Judge Mary Thornton House, and advocate of the PACT program who has watched its numbers increase since its inception. In the three years since it became mandatory, countywide attendance at the twice-monthly PACT classes has increased from 475 to 1,200.

Back at the Pasadena PACT class, marriage therapist Lisa Hacker frantically crammed as much advice as possible into her three hours. Don't communicate with the other parent if you're hungry, angry, lonely or tired. When you do communicate, be at your best; you may hate your boss too, but you wouldn't tell him so. When you negotiate, think about what the kids want—not what you want. Hear what the other person has to say.

And when it comes to introducing a new significant other to your children, wait as long as possible—at least six months, she said.