



# SMILE

*Oakland County's divorce education program helps parents recognize that how well their children do post-divorce depends largely on the parents' understanding of their children's needs and the impact on children of parents' attitudes and behaviors toward each other.*

**by Hon. Edward Sosnick**

## FAST FACTS

SMILE—Start Making It Livable for Everyone—is a divorce education program cofounded in Oakland County by the Hon. Edward Sosnick and Richard S. Victor.

SMILE recognizes that too often children are put in the middle of parents' conflicts and that divorcing parents often need assistance to create a positive environment for their children.

Through a grant made by the State Bar of Michigan, a videotape was produced incorporating the concepts of the SMILE program and is available for jurisdictions where resources are limited.

Since its inception in March 1990, almost 20,000 parents have attended the SMILE program.

Susan filed for divorce. Rick was angry and sad about her decision because he wanted the family to remain intact. He pleaded with Susan and told her that he would go to counseling or do whatever it would take to preserve the marriage. Susan was adamant about the divorce. In despair, Rick began using their four-year-old child, Joshua, as a pawn. He told Joshua that Mommy was breaking up the family, that she didn't love them, and that their lives were going to be miserable as a family living apart. Confused, Joshua began having angry outbursts at Susan and suffered from sleep disturbances.

Rick attended Oakland County's divorce education program, SMILE (Start Making It Liveable for Everyone). From information presented at the program, he learned that his actions were hurting his child far more than the divorce itself. He may have inflicted some pain on Susan, but he was doing more damage to Joshua. Rick reported that what he had learned from the program was a wakeup call for him.

Divorce is a traumatic experience, surpassed only by the death of a spouse, loved one, or child. As it marks the end of a relationship, it requires grieving to recover. Tragically, at a time when children need them most, parents are grappling with their own issues and emotions. They are sorting out finances, property, and parenting plans. They are struggling with their own anger, sadness, guilt, and the demise of their fantasy of living happily ever after and growing old together. Unfortunately, many parents believe that in ending their relationship as spouses, they are also dissolving their relationship as coparents. Even at

their best, parents have a diminished capacity to parent when divorce occurs. Their children's needs are often unidentified or relegated to second place.

While court orders emanating from the legal process provide for custody, par-

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enting time, and child support when minor children are involved, the legal process neither provides a means for an orderly, socially approved discharge of emotions nor a set of tools promoting a healthy adjustment. Too often parents allow their personal and interpersonal issues with their (ex) spouses to erupt into destructive behaviors that are passed from generation to generation.

Children need not be scarred forever by divorce. Studies show that the extent of parental conflict is the major factor in how well a child will psychologically adjust. Children cared for in a peaceful atmosphere with cooperative parents can grow up to be well-adjusted in spite of having lived in two homes. Since divorce results in every family member having to adapt to a new way of living, the more parents know about divorce, the better they and their children are able to cope.

As a result, divorce education programs have burgeoned throughout the United States. A frontrunner for this phenomenon has been Oakland County's SMILE program. SMILE was cofounded





by myself and Richard S. Victor, a family law attorney.

SMILE is a response to a need expressed by parents, the judiciary, family law attorneys, the court, and community mental health professionals. SMILE helps parents to recognize that how well their children do post-divorce depends largely on the parents' understanding of their children's needs and the impact on children of parents' attitudes and behaviors toward each other.

The developers of SMILE recognized that divorce is a process over which children have no control. Children should not become its victims. Too often, children are put in the middle of parents' conflicts, feel that they are to blame for the divorce, and suffer when one parent is uninvolved or absent. Sometimes parents find that their roles and expectations are undefined and cloudy. Divorcing parents often need assistance to create a positive environment for their children.

SMILE provides information about how parents can better define and attend to their children's emotions and needs. It also gives parents tools to develop closer relationships with their children. The program promotes parental cooperation by stressing the importance of coparenting for children's well-being. It provides specific behavioral guidelines so parents can relate to each other more positively.

The State Bar of Michigan made a grant of \$25,000 to the SMILE program developers for the production of a videotape incorporating the concepts of the SMILE program. In jurisdictions where resources are limited, the videotape allows one facilitator to use the tape as a basis for a program, provide other relevant information, and answer workshop participants' questions.

The videotape has been edited to a 12-minute version that Oakland County and other counties use to portray divorce-

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related issues from children's viewpoints in conjunction with the information presented by the volunteer speakers. Feedback from parents is that the video is poignant and that it helps them to more easily identify their children's issues. After viewing the SMILE video, one parent recently commented, "I cried for my children."

Divorce education programs work. For example, Arbuthnot and Gordon<sup>1</sup> conducted a study of a court-mandated, child focused class for divorcing parents both immediately after the class and six months later. Parents reported that they were less angry at their ex-spouse and were successful in dramatically lowering their children's exposure to parental conflict. Relative to a comparison group of parents divorcing the year before the classes were initiated, parents completing a class in Athens County, Georgia, were better able to work through how they would handle difficult child-related situations with their ex-spouses and were willing to let their children spend more time with the other parent. Oakland County's experience mirrors these results.

SMILE is a model program that has been replicated in most Michigan counties and other counties in the United States. The Oakland County program, sponsored by the Oakland County Circuit Court and Friend of the Court, is in its eleventh year. Since its implementation in the Family Division of Circuit Court on January 1, 1998, parents are required to attend this program. From the time SMILE began in March 1990, almost 20,000 parents and interested persons have attended.

For more information on this important program, you may contact my office at (248) 858-0340 or visit Oakland County's website at [www.co.oakland.mi.us/c\\_serv/foc/smile.html](http://www.co.oakland.mi.us/c_serv/foc/smile.html) ♦



*Hon. Edward Sosnick is chief judge of the Oakland County Sixth Circuit Court. He is a recipient of the State Bar of Michigan's Champion of Justice Award and the Oakland County Bar Association's Distinguished Service Award. He jointly founded the SMILE program in Oakland County with attorney Richard S. Victor.*

#### FOOTNOTE

1. Arbuthnot, J. and Gordon, D. A. (1966). "Does mandatory divorce education for parents work? A six-month outcome evaluation." *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 30(1), 60-81.