

Proven support for children going through divorce



At nine years of age, Caryn Garriga, MD, felt like she was the only one going through the trauma of having her parents split up. She was glad that her parents had the foresight to have her participate in a support group for children in St. Louis, MO developed by Children's Institute.

"The divorce rate wasn't so high back then, so I thought it was wonderful to learn that I wasn't alone and that many others had it worse than I did," she said. "It helped me normalize the feelings and feel safe and supported."

Twenty-five years later, 1.5 million children live through a divorce each year, which ends about 50 percent of U.S. marriages.

"I worry when I hear, 'They're little; they're kids; they're resilient; they'll get over it.' Children are not automatically resilient because of their youth. Resilience comes from support," Children's Institute researcher and Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) developer JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D. told a joint American Bar Association-American Psychological Association panel in Chicago last May.

Pedro-Carroll is among a handful of psychologists who have worked to transform the literature on coping with divorce into programs that provide such support via schools and courts. Hundreds of thousands of children worldwide have participated in CODIP in the 25 years since its inception, which uses play activities such as puppetry and role-playing to help children express and manage their feelings. Children who participate exhibit less anxiety and fewer worries after the program; they also possess a greater ability to solve personal problems.



Pedro-Carroll

Garriga believes that the support she gained was pivotal in her life: "I learned how to say, 'I'm not going to be in the middle,' and 'I'm not going to transfer messages.'"

Several years ago, when she was a pediatric resident at the University of Rochester, Garriga volunteered at Children's Institute. She served as a small group facilitator in A.C.T.—For the Children, the CODIP companion program for parents that helps parents learn how to work together to minimize the impact of divorce on their children.

"For all the talk of divorce in our society, most parents still don't know how their actions affect their kids," said Garriga, now 35. "Being able to talk and have people understand is so important for the children's well-being."

CODIP has been distributed to schools and social workers across the U.S. and most recently will be brought to scale in the Netherlands.

CODIP was featured in "Helping Kids Weather Divorce" by Ryan Blitstein, posted in May 2008 at miller-mccune.com and listed as a Program to Help Youth at helpingamericasyouth.gov. Pedro-Carroll was interviewed on WARM-FM (101.3) as recipient of the Tony Infantino Spirit Fund.