

# Solving the Growing Never Married Parent Dilemma for Courts and Divorce Professionals

By Don Gordon Ph.D., Executive Director of Center for Divorce Education

For more than twenty five years, The Center for Divorce Education has been dedicated to helping parents and children deal with the difficult process of divorce and separation. Based on our extensive research, we have developed highly effective methods for reducing the stress of divorce and separation for all parties.



## *ALMOST ONE OF EVERY FOUR BIRTHS TODAY ARE TO UNMARRIED, COHABITATING COUPLES*

-National Center for Health Statistics (2010)

These startling figures represent an eighty percent increase over 2002. Directly related to the increase of births to non-married, cohabitating couples, we have seen a significant increase of the number in never married parents going to court. It used to be that marriage was the norm when a pregnancy was involved, now it is not. Among the under age 25 group, over sixty percent of the births are to unmarried mothers (National Center for Health Statistics).

A significant number of never married couples raise children and live together for many years. While not legally married, their relationship dynamics at breakup are similar to married, divorcing parents. There is no evidence that this group of parents pose a different challenge for the courts and divorce professionals than their married counterparts.

There is, however a subset of never married parents that pose a particular challenge to courts – the younger parents.

Young, never married parents differ from their older counterparts in many important ways. Younger parents, those under 25, are generally low income and less educated. Their relationships range from producing a child as a result of a one-night liaison, to having been together and co-parenting an infant or young child over the course of only a few years. Less mature, co-parents with little experience functioning as a couple can create some of the most challenging cases in the courtroom and are more likely to put their child at risk.

## Dr. Don Gordon

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Dr. Gordon has been child and family psychologist for over 35 years; and has developed numerous effective evidence-based programs that are used internationally and help families worldwide.

The Center for Divorce Education is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to helping parents minimize the harmful effects divorce has on children.



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Younger, never married parents are more likely than older parents to expect the court to solve the problems they can't solve on their own. These include determining levels of financial support for the child and visitation rights. This is especially difficult because the brevity of their relationship has not allowed trust to develop between the young parents. Suddenly they are in a situation where they need to cooperate around the best interests of a child when there is less history of trust between the parties.

A never married mom with older children may have more confidence in her co-parent's ability to responsibly care for their child or children. The story can be very different for the very young, never married mother who has little confidence in a person she doesn't know, and yet he insists on his rights as a father. Quite often the young father is just as distrustful of the mother.

With younger parents, close connections with the extended family can be a blessing and a curse. New grandparents and siblings can provide childcare and financial support to the new parents. However, it can be a source of stress particularly in the case of a multigenerational living arrangement. This is especially difficult if new grandparents don't support the relationship between the child and the other parent.

These young parents have little chance to enjoy the less encumbered life of their peers. Their lives have been forever changed with the birth of their child. Many have a hard time with employment particularly in today's economy. There is no evidence to suggest that younger fathers are less willing to pay support for children, but they are hindered because of the lack of opportunity for a better paying job, especially for individuals with low levels of education.

## **Neurological Immaturity and Conflict Among Young Parents**

Under ideal circumstances each parent should be encouraged to be supportive of their child's relationship with the other parent. Without this cooperation, the family and extended family will endure constant conflict and eventually, one parent will often drop out.

Cooperation here is far easier said than done. Conflict is high among these young parents and it manifests itself in different ways in accordance with the parent's gender. Young unmarried mothers are often likely to restrict the access a father has to his child. She is also more likely to prevent shared decision making. Part of this is because of the fear on mom's part that the father cannot be trusted to make wise decisions when it comes to their child.

Neuroscience research tells us that the human brain is not fully developed until the mid-twenties. A younger mother's fear, anxiety and emotional swings are only exacerbated by this lack of neurological immaturity. The mother's objection is tied her neurological immaturity in addition to her lack of life experiences.

Males are even slower to develop. Men tend to be more likely to act assertive or be verbally loud or aggressive/ threatening when afraid. Young mothers are likely to be more dramatic, emotionally up and down. In turn the young men will react to drama with withdrawal or dominant verbal abuse.

Each parent has neurological immaturity manifesting itself in different ways. Combine this immaturity with all the stresses young parents face, it's no wonder that the courts see much more drama, more emotionality and fewer calm decisions being made. To top it off a lot of these clients have no money, so there is no legal representation. Therefore there is little coaching and support for these young folks.

## What can courts and divorce professionals do to compassionately deal with young parents?

It's natural to be irritated with teens, but court representatives can take the edge off of working with this population by keeping a few things in mind.

- Keep the neuroscience research in mind and be patient – Young people are not at fault for being immature, their brain has not yet fully developed.
- Remember the stresses very young parents live with – Young parents lack independence in spite of having a child themselves. They tend to have little money, no free time, and unstable family relationships. It's enough to put anyone in a bad mood.
- Try to see the court and the divorce professional as a mentor and a friend to the young family – Courts can play a tremendous role in helping very young parents grow and mature, and create better outcomes for their children.
- Stress the benefits of mediation—wherever possible, encourage young people to work through their future problems outside of the courtroom.
- Insist on pre-trial conferences to encourage young parents to think and slow down.
- By mandating quality co-parent education classes, courts can introduce parents to good parenting and co-parenting communication skills.

As a Clinical Psychologist and researcher I believe that good co-parenting education is vital to both the young parents and the future of the child they share. The best thing a court can do for itself and to support young parents and their children is to immediately get them into good, evidence based parent education classes. Young parents should be exposed to programs that teach skills in emotional regulation, respectful communication, and competent parenting. As soon as, or even before young parents enter the court system, get them into a good program. It saves money, frustration and heartbreak.

## What makes for a good parent education program?

Most jurisdictions around the country require some sort of co-parent education for separating or divorcing parents. Some of these are in-class sessions offered in the community and an increasing number of classes are available online. Online programming offers the parents a convenience that in-person classes do not, but very few are proven to be effective.

Courts should contemplate a couple of things when selecting a quality co-parent education program for their local families:

1. Does the program employ the best practices associated with adult learning? Does the program teach skills? Simply lecturing – giving people information - doesn't change behavior and certainly doesn't support diverse learning styles.
2. Does the curriculum have hard, objective evidence that the program changes behavior in participants? A court should ask if their local program is evidence based. Is there proof that it works? The best proof is documented evidence that the program was involved in controlled studies with treatment and control groups where the results are compared. This is the gold standard utilized in science.

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**The Center for Divorce Education offers a variety of professional services for courts and divorce professionals particularly with respect to young parents. Contact CDE at [staff@divorce-education.com](mailto:staff@divorce-education.com) for more information on how we can help improve services to families in transition.**