**Changing Families Group**

**Goals**

1. help children acquire an accurate picture of the divorce process through discussion and information,
2. normalize common feelings around divorce,
3. create a safe and supportive place for children to talk about their concerns related to the divorce situation,
4. identify, express, and understand feelings about the divorce,
5. acquire new coping skills to deal with feelings and situations experienced as a result of divorce;
6. help children test reality, and
7. make plans for the future

**Pre-Group Meeting**

Before our first session, the counselor will meet individually with all the students. The purpose of this meeting is to screen each member for group and talk about group details. What the group will be like, what will be expected of the student, confidentiality, and parental involvement are all discussed during this meeting. Students will also be encouraged to talk about any concerns or fears they had about the group in general. Students would also be told that they could come see me between sessions if they felt they needed to talk about other issues.

Note: if students struggle with role play, can substitute discussion or acting out with figure or animal family.

**Session 1**

The first session’s objectives are to set up the framework for group and get to know each other, the goals, and the ground rules. The group will start with the introduction by explaining the purpose, time, and length of the group in developmentally appropriate language. Tell students, “divorce can bring up questions, special feelings, and even worries, and that in a group like this they can discuss what divorce is like.” Next, the counselor would model an ice breaking activity for children to participate in where we pretend to be an animal. Each student and leader will be given a card of an animal to act like while other members guess. Once students have begun talking about something other than themselves, it will be easier for them to continue to talk and open up in further sessions. The group members will then go around and introduce themselves. Ground rules will be made cooperatively by students and written on chart paper. If needed, leaders will direct students toward rules such as (1) anyone who wants to may have a turn, (2) we listen to everyone, (3) no laughing or making fun of what anyone says, (4) be honest, and (5) respect confidentiality. Confidentiality will then be explained in developmentally appropriate language, and leaders will model how to share personal experiences without divulging other members’ information. Next, the group will discuss the group goals. Use Dinosaurs Divorce by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown to introduce the idea of divorce. Students will pick names for characters and each take turns to tell part of the story and tell how the members feel. Students create an ending and we close with discussing how they would like the story to end, usually in the parents getting back together. Empathize with feelings that they wish the divorce should never have happened.

**Session 2**

The objective of session two is to bring out thoughts and feelings about inter-parental hostility and is to address feelings of loss and vulnerability experienced early on in the separation or divorce process. The group should review members’ names and ground rules. A special name can be made for the group by the students to promote ownership. Children then list everyone they know who has experienced divorce including friends, family, celebrities, cartoon characters, etc. Role play or discuss parents in a pre-divorce argument, pausing to discuss students’ feelings and observations. Then students will role play children listening in to the parents’ fight from upstairs, stopping frequently to discuss. Together students define divorce, separation, and other related terms; discuss each individual’s current situation; explore feelings; and discuss possible ways to cope with feelings. A possible activity to explore definitions is to put these words on cards and give students sticky notes to define, put feelings and stick to the words. Role play or discuss parents telling the students of their plans to separate or divorce. This will bring about discussion and questions about divorce, feelings, and apprehensions. Acknowledge children’s concerns and discuss possible ways to cope with feelings or apprehensions.

**Session 3**

The objective of session three is to focus on family constellations and to explore family structure, living arrangements, and support persons. Drawings of “who lives at my house?” can be used to connect students with similar situations (can give students paper with a blank house printed on both sides to put family in two different locations). Custody and conflicted loyalty about with whom the child lives can be dealt with through a mock courtroom scene. This can bring up concerns about choosing between parents and the longing for a positive relationship with both parents. The counselor can also help soothe the burden children feel by clarifying their role in custody battles; it’s not their fault. Children discuss their situations and the group discusses why it is important to talk about problems. Visitation skits help deal with a wide range of emotions from sadness to anger over a lack of involvement from the nonresidential parent. A letter to a “missing dad” may also be already written and shown to students, or the group may create their own. The purpose of this letter is to normalize the longings for this relationship and to dispel the common fear that the child is unlovable, thus causing the nonresidential parent to avoid visiting. The counselor may discuss how sometimes parents don’t visit not because of the child, but because of grown-up problems.

**Session 4**

The objective of session four is to identify worries about divorce, find ways to deal with these worries, and role play talking to parents about worries. Some worries may include parents dating, remarrying, or step-families. Group leaders may choose to put worries on note cards and have students play Jenga or connect 4 and pick a card to talk about before their turn. Possible worries are: dating, divorce, seeing mom/dad, step parent, step siblings. Group leaders may discuss ways to handle worries. Role play or discuss the mother, the step-father, and the students play the mother and step-father’s children. The skit develops into a scene at the dinner table which facilitates feelings of competition, loyalty conflicts, and resentment. Research has shown that skits about step-families often promote children to seek out their parents and ask for more time to get used to the changing family dynamics.

**Session 5**

The objective of session five is to build on the previous session and encourage children to continue discussing, problem solving, and practice seeking out parents or other adults to talk about worries or fears. The issue of blame should be brought up again and feelings of guilt or fault should be dealt with. The last half of the session is spent brainstorming ideas and articles for a divorce group newspaper. Discussion of the newspaper also helps to bring up termination before the final meeting. While students act as reporters and interview each other or the group, the counselor takes the time to summarize and help integrate what has been learned. Between sessions five and six, the counselor makes a group newspaper with the group’s picture and articles, being mindful not to breach confidentiality.

**Session 6**

The objective of session six is to terminate the group. This last session functions as a celebration or graduation from group. Give each student three copies of the newspaper to cut down on the feeling of loss and separation. The picture and articles of the newspaper serve as a reminder of all the work and progress the student has made in group, while providing the child with a memento to remember a significant time in his or her life. The multiple copies can be shared with parents who live in different houses. Students can eat snacks and refreshments and read articles from the newspaper aloud, and the counselor facilitates discussion about what each child has learned, elaborate on coping strategies, and at the end say goodbye.



We talked about the parts that are hard for us:

* Deep stuff
* Family we miss or don’t know
* Hard to leave one parent and be with another
* Not getting mad sometimes

Dr. Robinson, were members of the group.

What we have in common

* Our families are not always perfect
* We like the same foods
* All of us are human
* A lot of boys

**Changing Families Group News**

We read Dinosaurs Divorce by Marc Brown. We drew pictures of the people who live in our homes. We shared our experiences with each other.

The group met for six weeks. We discussed our changing families. We found we have many things in common!

We learned:

* Sometimes we feel sad about our family situation
* When your family changes, you don’t have to feel bad all the time, because there will be some good things, too.
* We learned about ourselves and each other