

I DON'T WANT TO CHOOSE: A SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Program Overview

“*I Don't Want to Choose*” is a newly developed school-based curriculum for groups of middle school children whose parents are separated or divorced. The program is designed to be run by a professional who is familiar with this age group such as a school social worker, school psychologist, guidance counselor, teacher, or school administrator. The purpose of the program is to teach children how to resist the pressure to choose between their parents by developing a stronger sense of self. The program can operate during lunch or other non academic portions of the day so that it does not take time away from their school activities.

The Curriculum

“*I Don't Want to Choose*” is a 20 week curriculum based on the “*I Don't Want to Choose*” book and workbook. The core of the program is an exploration of family situations which are likely to occur in separated or divorced families that can create conflicting feelings in children that they have to choose one parent over the other. Each week the facilitator, using the *I Don't Want to Choose* manual, presents a situation, asks the participants to generate examples, discusses the kinds of thoughts and feeling that children might have in such a situation, presents four problem solving approaches (see below), and guides the children through the workbook activities that are focused on that situation.

Family Situations

Seventeen family situations have been identified through empirical research with divorced parents as well as with adults who experienced loyalty conflicts as children. Situations include one parent looking sad, hurt, or angry, when a child leaves to be with the other parent; one parent undermining the rules and authority of the other parent; and one parent confiding in the child about the other parent. These situations create the expectation in the child that he or she should do something to please one parent that will most likely hurt or betray the other parent.

Problem-Solving

The cornerstone of “*I Don't Want to Choose*” is the development of four complimentary approaches to dealing with loyalty conflicts. When these approaches are used, children develop the skills that they need to resist the pressure to choose one parent over the other.

Critical thinking skills help children be clearer about where their ideas are coming from and can prevent one parent from implanting false ideas about the other parent.

Considering options helps children understand that there is usually more than one way to respond to any situation and that if they brainstorm ideas, they may be able to identify a solution that will prevent them from doing something that they might later regret.

Listening to one's heart helps children be clear about their values and priorities and prevents them from becoming overpowered by the emotions and needs of a parent.

Getting support helps children identify strengths within themselves and resources in their environment that they can draw on when needed.

Program Developers

The *I Don't Want to Choose* book and work book was developed by Amy J.L. Baker and Katherine Andre and published by the Kindred Spirits foundation.

Amy J.L. Baker has a Ph.D. in developmental psychology and is the Director of Research for the New York Foundling Fontana Center for Child Protection in New York City. She has 20 years experience conducting research on parent-child relationships on topics such as attachment, early intervention, parent involvement in their children's education, and child welfare. She is a nationally recognized expert in parental alienation and loyalty conflicts. She is the author or co-author of 4 books and over 50 articles. Her website is www.amyjl baker.com.

Katherine Andre, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist with a clinical practice in Northern California for nearly 20 years. For 10 years, she has been a family law mediator. She earned her doctorate from the University of Georgia where she received specialized training in child neuropsychology. She is a recognized expert in parental alienation and loyalty conflict. She has published in peer reviewed journals and been on internet and radio shows. Her therapeutic work with children and parents is derived from evidenced-based treatments.

Kindred Spirits is a non-profit organization dedicated to healing parent-child alienation. Our mission is to develop resources for those coping with child/parent alienation; educate professionals responsible for children's well being on the harmful consequences of child/parent alienation; support research to evaluate the social and individual consequences of children needlessly deprived of a parent; and advocate institutional reform to recognize child/parent alienation.

"I Don't Want to Choose" in Your School

The *I Don't Want to Choose* program can be implemented as an add-on to an existing school-based program for children or as a stand-alone program. Program developers will work with your school staff to make the program work in each setting. Nominal costs include \$25 per family for program materials and \$50 for a reusable facilitator manual (bulk discounts are available). Training and support are not required but are available free of charge for the first 10 hours.

Programs for younger and older children may also be available.

For more information about the *I Don't Want to Choose* program and resource material, contact Dara Blumenberg, Executive Director, Kindred Spirits, at (917) 710-8187.