

Man-to-man classes teach divorced dads how to parent

COPE offers tips on doing what's best for children

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A man whose marriage has failed can still succeed as a father.

That's the upshot of a new class being offered by COPE Family Center, where fathers who attend a series of two-hour sessions get tips on how to avoid conflicts with former spouses and partners so that they focus on doing what's best for their children.

A recent session attended by a dozen Napa men featured a video, followed by a group discussion led by Raphael Ortiz, a COPE parent educator and home visitor, explaining how arguments between divorced parents can hurt their children.

"Try not to put the children in the middle," Ortiz advised the men. "And let your children know it's OK to say they are stressed about being in the middle."

Men in the weekly sessions talk with each other about the value of being a strong presence in the lives of their kids. They discuss communication skills, how to discipline children and how to embrace co-parenting.

"I learned that my presence in the family is needed," said one young father. "I learned to keep my child's interests in mind and not be selfish."

Some men learn that changing the way they approach stressful family situations can have a positive impact on their former spouses, too.

"I'm also taking an anger management class, and hopefully my counseling will rub off on my ex-wife, too," said one father. "We now teach each other how to treat each other."

Videos titled "Children In-between" also teach men not to put down the other parent in front of their children, not to discuss money problems in front of the kids and not to quiz sons and daughters about what the other spouse is doing or who she is seeing.

Ortiz, who generally follows the "24/7 Dads" curriculum, but supplements the instruction with videos and guest speakers, follows up each teaching segment with a discussion about the overall message, reminding men that a father can protect his children by waiting until they are out of earshot before discussing sensitive subjects.

The "24/7 Dads" curriculum was introduced by the National Fatherhood Initiative, founded in 1994 following findings that fathers are not present in one of every three households, said Julie Murphy, the COPE program manager for home visitation.

The five weekly classes held eight weeks at a time, range in size from 10 to 22 men, and are led by Ortiz in two languages. The two Spanish sessions are called "Siempre Papa."

A native of Acapulco, Ortiz is a stepfather to two teenagers.

While in his fourth year studying psychology at the Albert Einstein College in Acapulco, Ortiz moved to the United States and began studying to become a family therapist at Napa Valley College. He saw COPE was looking for a case manager and interviewed with Murphy.

“Raphael is joyful, respectful and compassionate,” said Murphy. “He is why the fathers keep coming back. They get treated with the respect they deserve, and they realize that Raphael loves what he does.”

Ortiz, 47, does more than conduct classes. He also helps some of the men by bringing in guest speakers to educate men about legal issues. (About 25 percent of the attendees are court ordered).

“Sometimes fathers need guidance on how to help themselves in court,” said Ortiz, who also visits men at home and accompanies men to medical appointments.

“I try to explain to them the best way I can that there's no such thing as a perfect parent or a perfect child — only those who are trying to make the best decisions they can for the rest of their lives.

“They need this, not because they don't want to do it, but because they don't know how.”

Murphy said the men who attend class deserve a pat on the back.

“They have the courage to come forward, and we have to think of helping dads — no matter what — by teaching them to be there for their children.”

More information about the program is available from the COPE website, www.copefamilycenter.org or by calling the main phone number, 707-252-1123.

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