

# Children: divorce's real victims

In an effort to prevent the little ones suffering when the marriage falls apart, two divorcees have compiled a guide to putting children first.

By Leon Symons

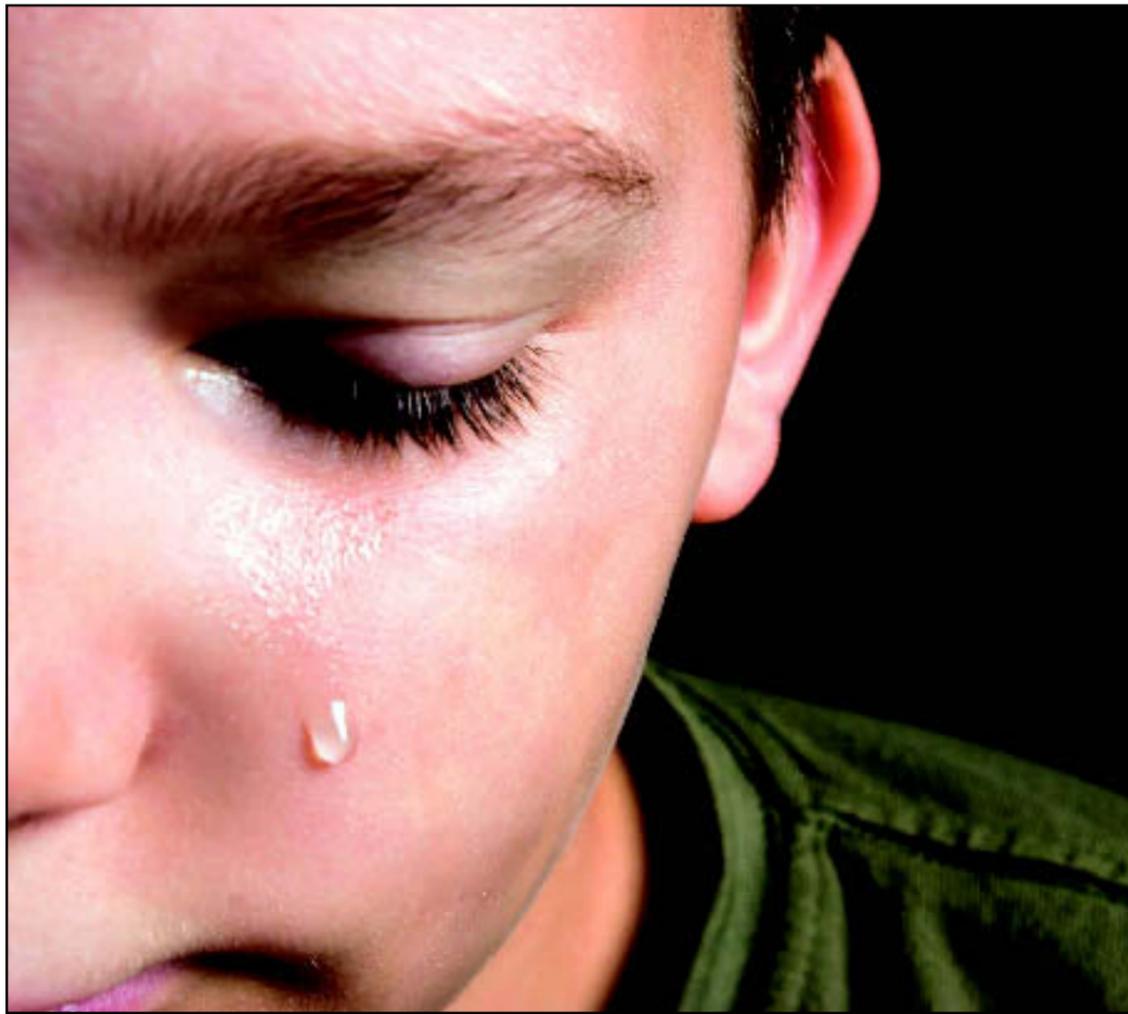
In any divorce, there are always losers — and they tend to be the children. While the grown-ups argue about who gets the house and custody of the BMW, the interests of their offspring can often be neglected.

In an attempt to protect them, a parenting organisation has launched the first publication written specifically to help divorcing Jewish parents put their children first. The 56-page Parenting Plans booklet, produced by Jewish Unity for Multiple Parenting (JUMP), has been two years in the making. It is also the first of its kind by any ethnic minority in Britain.

The idea arose out of the bitter experiences of two of JUMP's members in trying to maintain relationships with their children while going through their own divorces. It has been endorsed by Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks and Board of Deputies' president Henry Grunwald.

As co-author and mother of two sons Lisa Cohen explains, the aim of the booklet is to give separating parents strategies to help them deal with the issues involving children.

"Someone once said to me that how you start a divorce is how you set the pattern for the future," she says. "The purpose of this booklet is to help people in the earliest stages to realise that it is all about the children. We are trying to change the current



situation where many husbands and wives who are separating spend most of their time dividing their cash and assets when they should be deciding what happens to their children. Everything else should follow from that — under whose roof they will live, how is it going to be paid for, everything to do with the welfare of the children. For years and years, it has been done the wrong way round."

Her co-author, Stephen Wiser, 55 and a father of four children, says: "Lisa and I have both been through

this experience. It is too late to change things for us now, but our aim is to make people realise that it is the children who come off worst."

Ms Cohen adds: "We want to try to change the culture that is perpetuated by the courts of an adversarial system where there is a winner and a loser, the loser usually being the non-resident parent. We have contacted judges, barristers and solicitors to get them to offer collaborative law, where one lawyer mediates between husband and wife rather than ev-

**'Our aim is to make people realise that it is the children who come off the worst'**

eryone rushing off to court which, apart from anything else, incurs huge expense for both parents.

"Unusually for a mother, I have no contact with my two sons, while there are many fathers in the same predicament. This is partly why I wanted to write this booklet."



Managing divorce: booklet authors Stephen Wiser and Lisa Cohen

A primary aim of the publication is to encourage parents to share parenting time — the time each divorced parent spends with their children.

Mr Wiser says: "A husband and wife try to decide on parenting time usually when they are both charged up emotionally. If they cannot decide, the court will make an order. But if one parent ignores it, as we have seen many times, the courts do little or nothing to enforce these orders. One parent is then faced with returning to court again and again, which can take months, cost thousands and will almost certainly change nothing."

JUMP started in 2001, when Ms Cohen and Mr Wiser, who had been attending a Jewish Care-backed group, saw there was no supportive literature in the Jewish community to help separating parents with issues surrounding their children. It has become not only a support group but also one that lobbies government.

It sees the booklet as part of a broader educational tool that will apply across the community. It is intended for use by anyone in the process of separating to understand the issues around parenting time arrangements.

For more details on JUMP, log on to [www.jump-parenting.co.uk](http://www.jump-parenting.co.uk) or call 020 8386 6282

## TWO PARENTS REVEAL THE MISERY THAT SEPARATION HAS BROUGHT THEIR OFFSPRING

### Splitting up: The father's story

A FATHER of three children, boys aged 13 and eight and a girl aged four, was married for 16 years. The father, who wished to remain anonymous, told his story to the JC this week.

"From the moment we decided to part, it was like dealing with a stranger and not the woman I had been living with for 16 years.

"It was as though all our previous values and beliefs had never existed. The only topic of conversation — when there was one — was finance and money and nothing about the children.

"Instead of doing what we had agreed, if ever we found ourselves in this position, solicitors became involved and prolonged the whole process. We found ourselves spending more of our lives at the family court in Holborn than actually getting on with living — and all at a cost in excess of £100,000.

"Presents I sent the children on Pesach were intercepted by my wife and

returned unopened. She seemed hell bent on acting as objectionably and hurtfully as possible. I had no choice other than to go before the courts to get an agreed pattern of meaningful contact with my own children."

Their intention, he explained, was that the children would stay in their home and schools to avoid unnecessary disruption. "That £100,000 could have been used for clothing, school fees, holidays for the children," said the father.

"Ultimately, the solicitors made not one iota of difference. The final outcome turned out to be exactly as we would have wanted anyway. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, we realised the solicitors were just trying to do their best."

Very little progress could be made, he went on, "if you

*'From when we decided to part, the only topic of conversation — when there was one — was about finance and nothing about the children'*

are dealing with somebody whose sole aim is to destroy their former partner either financially or emotionally because of their own unresolved issues, whether through disappointment or revenge or control.

"In reality, the children are caught in the crossfire and conflict around them, and they are the poorer for it in many ways. When one parent is behaving unreasonably, it is because their dislike of their former partner is simply greater than their love of their children. Those people would really benefit from mediation."

After he left the family home, he said, "my wife seemed to turn into a Jeekyll and Hyde character. Her attitude was that she should have the home and the children and that I should pay for everything. After 16 years together, I felt reduced to the level of a sperm donor and walking wallet. The only conversations I got from her were about money.

"Many men do not realise once they leave the matrimonial home, unless the mother wants the father to have contact with his children, it is an uphill struggle simply to stay in touch," he said.

### Splitting up: The mother's story

STEPHANIE — not her real name — married in 1992 and separated little more than eight years later. She has two sons.

"I saw my parents divorced and I genuinely committed to making my marriage successful. I was desperate for my boys to have a hands-on father," said the 44-year-old.

But that was not to be. She says that once they had separated, her former husband repeatedly took the boys without permission, culminating one weekend when "I was told by my elder son, who was then four, that he and his daddy were going away to start a new life. My son knew this before I did. My husband then told me he was not coming back with the boys.

*'My husband told me that he would lie, cheat and steal to keep me from seeing my sons'*

"At the same time, his relatives had gone into our home without my permission and removed everything. I was mortified."

A court decided that the couple's eldest son should stay with his father while the younger boy, who was then only two, was returned to the care of his mother.

That signalled the start of a battle for parental responsibility — the term "custody" has not existed officially since 1989 — that has led Stephanie to attend around 40 court hearings at a cost that she estimates at about £70,000.

She went to local courts in Barnet and eventually to the High Court in central London as she fought as hard as she could to get her children back — but ultimately to no avail.

"My husband told me he would lie, cheat and steal to keep me from seeing my sons. My elder son stopped seeing me after two years of regular contact, even though I got a shared-residency order in October, 2003.

"I was living on a knife-edge. I feared my younger son would go the same way because of the continuous insidious criticism of me. My worst nightmare happened in

*'My sons will not talk to me or write to me or anything. Cards and presents remain unopened'*

July, 2005, when my younger son stopped coming to stay with me. I felt the whole legal system failed me. I had even got one judgement that he was causing them significant emotional harm and got to the first stage of putting them into care.

"My husband had made complaints against me that I was harming the children. But there were never any reports by the police, social workers or anyone else. He lied — he made it up, and the court believed him."

Eventually she decided to withdraw unilaterally from going to court.

"I had simply had enough. I could not face it any more. Now, on the rare occasions that I see my sons, they will not talk to me, write to me or anything.

"Cards and presents are returned unopened. I am in a dreadful situation and I just want other people to know how bad it can get."