

INFO CURRENT AS OF MAY 2005

## CHILD IMPACT SEMINARS

*This column is published in conjunction with the New Hampshire Bar Association as a public service. It is not presented as specific advice, which may only be provided by an attorney based upon each individual situation. If you need a referral to an attorney, the NHBA Lawyer Referral Service is available to assist you. Call 229-0002 or visit our website at [www.nhbar.org](http://www.nhbar.org) for more information.*

**Question:** I am going through a divorce in Grafton County. I have received notice from the court that I have to attend a mandatory child impact seminar. I believe my wife does too. Is this a new requirement? Is everyone going through a divorce required to attend? What is the child impact seminar all about?

**Answer:** In 1993, the New Hampshire legislature enacted a law that required all parties involved in custody or support issues to participate in a 4-hour seminar on the impact of divorce and separation on children. These sessions are designed to help parents and children understand the process of divorce or separation and minimize its negative effects. The judicial branch contracts with a private provider to present the information at the seminar.

Many states are now requiring similar parenting education or child impact seminars as individuals go through the separation and divorce process. These programs have proven successful in reducing the amount of stress and tension that occurs in a family during this difficult time.

The court has contracted with Behavioral Health Network, Inc. of Concord to administer the program. Their close working relationship with community mental health centers has proved valuable in delivering a consistent message to all the participants. Their website, [www.bhninc.com](http://www.bhninc.com) <<http://www.bhninc.com>>, provides a great deal of information about the program, locations, schedules, etc.

According to the law, both parties are required to pay a fee directly to the provider for attending the program. The fee is \$75 per person; however, there is a sliding scale that allows for those who are indigent to have part or all of the cost waived.

In developing the curriculum, the focus was on issues concerning the children, how they react to divorce or separation and how parents can help their children deal appropriately with these difficult and emotional situations. Parents are encouraged to work cooperatively to reduce the stress of separation for the children. A variety of teaching techniques are used during the seminars to meet the various learning styles of all those present. The statute requires that the seminar be conducted by a certified family therapist as well as having one male and one female presenter. The seminar outlines the normal developmental stages that children go through and how the divorce process can affect these stages. There is discussion around the steps that parents can take to reduce the negative affects of separation on the children. Such topics as communication, how to identify problem behaviors and resources for assistance are also discussed with the participants. If a party fails to comply with the attendance requirement, the court can take appropriate action, including contempt procedures. However, it is rare that this occurs. The provider maintains a list of those individuals who have attended the program so that verification of attendance is sent to the court. It is required that the seminar be completed within 45 days of service on the respondent.

Since its inception, the program has met with overwhelming success. The provider and the court closely monitor the evaluation forms that are completed by the participants. Comments by the participants are particularly telling in that they express a genuine satisfaction with what they have learned in the program and often indicate that the program should expand to include the children themselves. This occurs despite an initial reluctance to attend and to paying the fee. There seems to be positive evidence, through these evaluations, that the program is meeting its

objective. Parents attending the seminar, either together or separately, have indicated in the evaluations that they became much more aware of the problems their children may be experiencing as a result of their divorce. They appear to have learned ways of helping their children through this process with as little stress and confusion as possible.

*Information provided by Joan Bishop, Court Coordinator, New Hampshire Superior Court,  
Concord.*

