

MAKE UP AFTER YOU BREAK UP

By RICHARD BATH

It may be end of the marriage, but for children divorce is often the start of a whole new set of problems – many are scarred for life. Can a revolutionary new approach to break-up provide the solution? And should it, as many lawyers believe, be mandatory in Scotland?

ON THURSDAY night in a profoundly unremarkable office in Edinburgh's Canning Street, a remarkable thing happened. A disparate collection of 20 warring parents, many of whom were in the throes of messy divorce proceedings, stopped, stepped back from the bile and the bitterness and made a conscious decision to put the interests of their children before their own needs.

Parents whose default mode was to rant and rave, whose mindset had become totally dominated by obsessive self-interest, acknowledged – some of them for the first time – that they don't have a monopoly on angst and hurt.

They did so because, while some of them may hate the partner they once loved, they still love the children they had together. They were here on a mission to save their offspring from the worst effects of marital breakdown.

If this was a self-consciously selfless moment in the lives of many of the parents present, for Christina McGhee, the woman running the workshop, it was just another day at the office. The willowy 40-year-old Texan divorce coach, chirpy presenter of Channel 4's *How to Divorce Without Screwing Up Your Kids* and high priestess of the child-centric collaborative approach to break-up that is revolutionising the way Americans deal with divorce, is in Scotland to show us what we're missing.

Her theory is simple. If divorce is tough on parents, for kids it is a hellish process that leaves many emotionally scarred for life. Children from divorced households are more prone to insecurity and anxiety, more likely to fall prey to alcohol and drug abuse, at higher risk of becoming pregnant as teenagers and more likely to fail academically – and their own long-term relationships are significantly more likely to end in divorce.

With 40% of the 30,000 Scottish marriages that took place in 2007 statistically doomed to end in divorce, that is a lot of damaged souls. In fact, Relationships Scotland, an umbrella group of divorce experts, estimates that by the time the children of cohabiting couples whose relationships have broken down are factored in – more than 50% of British children were born out of wedlock last year

– in excess of 50,000 Scottish children witness their parents split up each year.

Statistics such as those are part of the reason that the Scottish Collaborative Family Law Group (SCFLG) and Relationships Scotland last week lobbied the government to make such schemes mandatory for all divorcing Scots. And law firms, such as HBJ Gateley Waring in Edinburgh, are now offering workshops for divorcing parents. If nothing else, they argue, the £25 fee for the whole process (£10 for those on income support) is a remarkably small amount to invest for a potentially significant return.

The general rule of thumb is that the messier and more acrimonious the divorce, the higher the cost to the children involved. It's impossible to quantify the misery of marital breakdown, but the staggering figure that three out of every five fathers lose all contact with their children within three years of splitting from their partner gives an indication of just how many divorces cause profound long-term effects on the children involved.

And while the emotional damage may be the most obvious byproduct of soaring divorce rates, it is by no means the only cost. There is no research to quantify the financial harm done on this side of the Atlantic, but in America, where the divorce rate has now hit 50%, the annual cost to the economy of dealing with the children of broken marriages is estimated to be an astronomical £56 billion.

In the US, they have gradually come to the realisation that the adversarial system that pits parents against each other actually exacerbates the harm done to children, by increasing the likelihood of acrimony and a total breakdown of communications between parents. They have concluded that if they're to break the cycle whereby the children of divorced parents go on to become divorcees themselves, jaw-jaw is the solution, not war-war.

Currently 38 of the 50 states operate a system in which all parents who file for divorce undergo compulsory workshops, the express intention of which is to minimise the damage done to children by marital breakdown. And this is a system with teeth: if you have children but the judge isn't convinced you will put them first, you simply don't get your divorce.

This is where McGhee comes in. She freely admits that most of the parents who come to her four-hour workshop in her home state of Texas are sceptical, but says that few leave without at least being given food for thought.

"Parents come to a mandatory class and, when they arrive, they sit there with their arms crossed, rolling their eyes and making the comments about how they should be paid to come rather than the other way around," says McGhee. "But usually after about ten minutes you can see the body language change and the barriers come down. We know that 90 to 95% walk away feeling they've gained something valuable.

"That's because this is a very child-centric process. Parent education is about perception-sharing because many parents think they're the only ones (going through this). It's very rewarding for them to hear other parents talking about their experiences, to know that there are other people struggling with these issues.

"It also gives them the chance to hear their ex-partner's perspective in a more neutral setting. If a mum hears another father talk about his fears of not seeing his children then she'll immediately relate that to her own husband's situation. Or if a mother talks about how heartbreaking it is for children when Dad doesn't turn up for a visit or time together, it can bring home to each of the fathers present the impact their actions can have. That process challenges perceptions and does it in a safe environment."

McGhee is quick to dispel any notions that she's a tree-hugging sort. This is serious stuff, and is treated as such: parents are encouraged to view their joint responsibility for the well-being of their kids as if they were running a business together, with all the emotion stripped out. This is all about establishing ground rules that are enforceable, with no room for 'he-said, she-said' misinterpretation. In extreme cases, there's a notebook that follows the child, or children, as they move between their parents' homes. This forms a diary of time spent with each parent, including details of everything they did and even what they ate: if it's not in the book, it doesn't count.

The coping strategies cover everything from how to deal with children playing one parent off against another, to the importance of a mother visiting her former partner's new home so that the children know she can envisage the surroundings they're living in when they're not with her. But this isn't counselling: this is more like a university seminar with Professor McGhee outlining the rules and parents clarifying details along the way. It is an unashamedly prescriptive approach: McGhee is effectively saying, "Do these things and the chances of damaging your children will be dramatically reduced."

One critic described Christina McGhee as having a "PhD in the glaringly obvious", but far from briding at the charge that she is simply peddling common sense, the Texan embraces it. "What I teach parents isn't rocket science, and for someone on the outside looking in, it does seem glaringly obvious," she agrees. "But while you're in the moment, in the eye of the crisis, what seems rational and logical goes out of the window. You go into survival mode, going from day to day, moment to moment.

"What I offer parents is simplicity, a straightforward way to address their problems, because once it becomes difficult it's untenable. If you posit great psychodynamic theories then parents will just say, 'Well, that's fine for other people, but that's not something that I can do.' I need every parent who walks away from one of my classes to say, 'I can do this' – so it needs to be very simple."

The first thing divorcing parents who come to McGhee's workshops need to understand is that she is not there as a referee: she's not interested in the historical detritus of a failed relationship. Parents aren't explicitly told to leave their emotional baggage at the door, but that's the message. By the time they reach her, divorce is a reality; coping with it is the overriding priority.

"Nothing is black and white, so it's very important to communicate to parents that you understand that there are less than ideal situations out there. There are things you can't control, but it's about making the most of what you've got. It may not be ideal but how do you ensure you don't make it worse?"

That's all very well, but what happens, I ask her, when one parent refuses to engage? What if a mother, say, who perceives herself as the wronged party, is willing to use her kids to gain some measure of retribution for the sins of the father?

McGhee, who says that virtually all parents attend her workshops separately, counters: "You don't need both of the parents to buy in; research shows that if one parent can break away and become that stable, nurturing resource for kids, they will cope far better," before adding that few parents are immune to practical demonstrations of how their actions are hurting their children.

Her television programme last year demonstrated exactly that point. McGhee took three British families to America to attend her workshops. Two were couples, but Sue Butler's ex-husband, Rupert, refused point-blank to attend. Despite the fact that his only contact with his kids was a monthly visit from his son to his new home in Holland, he insisted everything was fine between him and his two children.

That changed when the producers of *How to Divorce Without Screwing Up Your Children* flew Rupert over to Sussex for a meeting with his family. He was shown a clip from the TV show in which his son became extremely upset that his dad had not travelled to Houston, when the fathers from the other families had both made the trip. "I think the penny dropped," said Sue. Rupert now sees both children every other week rather than seeing one child once a month.

Getting mothers to proactively support their ex-husband's new life is key, says McGhee when asked why so many fathers quickly become estranged from their children. It is a counter-intuitive process that begins with getting fathers to recognise the role of the mother. "A lot of the research points to mothers being the gatekeepers to fathers' relationships with their children," she says. "When fathers have been through this process, they are far more likely to be supportive of the mother's role, which in turn means they're more likely to be able to (be allowed to) have contact with their children. That in turn means they are more likely to pay support, so everyone benefits."

While McGhee says that she is not an advocate for divorce – "I'm a great believer in marriage; I've been married for almost 14 years" – her starting point is that divorce is now so widespread that society has to learn how to deal with it more effectively. Or, as she puts it in her own inimitable way, "Our commitment has to be to divorce with integrity."

She readily admits that for the "high-conflict couples" who constitute about a tenth of divorcing couples but use nine-tenths of resources, her workshops may have little impact. But she is not the only one who is convinced that for the majority of divorcing couples her approach can markedly reduce the sum of human misery caused by spiralling divorce rates.

McGhee knows the problems that can arise if a marriage breaks up without any thought for the children, and remains a passionate, evangelical advocate for the collaborative approach. After all, the former social worker is the product of a broken home herself.

Perhaps that's why the exact moment when her vocation became a crusade is etched on her mind. It was 13 years ago and she had just become a stepmother. It wasn't the first time she had witnessed first hand the devastation that accompanies divorce (she was 14 when her own parents split up), but

it was the first time she had consciously acknowledged what breaking up does to the juvenile psyche, to her own emotional development.

"There was a collision between my personal and professional life because I'm a child from a divorced family," says McGhee, who admits that she "struggled to cope" with her parents' divorce and subsequently "picked inappropriate partners" as a young woman.

"But my parents' divorce wasn't the motivation that forced me into this area – that came when I became a step-parent. I saw children struggling with their circumstances and living out of two households, and like any good social worker I went out to get information and find out what I should do. I was able to reflect on my own experience and knew what I didn't want my kids to go through.

"But since then I've become conscious of a wider role. I got into the business because I really I wanted to make things better for children. But I soon realised that if I really wanted to help them out, I'd need to work with the parents because if they didn't get the support at home, I was setting the kids up to fail.

"I couldn't allow that. I've walked in those shoes before. And they're not good shoes."

•*Scottish Collaborative Family Law Group (www.scottish-collaborativelawyers.com); Relationships Scotland (www.relationships-scotland.org.uk); Christina McGhee's website, Divorce and Children (www.divorceandchildren.com)*