

Speaker: Children of divorced parents can do well

By RENITA FENNICK

Citizens' Voice Staff Writer

Family Service Association hears Barber

Bonnie Barber uses the analogy of catching a cold when she talks about children of divorce — the odds are in your favor if you already have a healthy foundation.

"It's like catching a cold," Dr. Barber told a group gathered for the 99th annual meeting of the Family Service Association of Wyoming Valley. "If another child in the class has a cold, your child is at an increased risk of catching it. But, if he is otherwise healthy, the odds are good he won't catch the cold."

"The situation is similar for a child whose parents are divorced," the family counseling expert said. "If the family is otherwise healthy, it minimizes the risk of stress after the divorce."

Barber, who holds master's and doctorate degrees in developmental psychology from the University of Michigan, is a member of the Penn State University

Human Development and Family Studies department at University Park. Her research interests include risk, resilience and preventive intervention for adolescents and mothers in divorced families.

Barber's address capped the luncheon meeting of the Family Service Association, which included a report by executive director Teddi Berlatsky, president's report by Frank Jacobelli, and the election of directors, officers and trustees.

Barber's half-hour presentation, aimed at caseworkers and others who deal with families who are experiencing problems, took aim at the "negative, stereotypical images that plague families torn apart by divorce."

Instead, the speaker attempted to paint a brighter outlook for children of divorce.

"These negative portrayals in the media, unfortunately, are not

balanced by stories that show the other side," Barber said. "Discussion of divorce is rarely free of emotion. I know; I am a child of divorce but not all families fit the picture that these images show...stories about troubled adolescents and teenage pregnancies."

Barber attacked *The Atlantic Monthly* for its front-page article: "Dan Quayle Was Right," which

reinforced, with research data, the former vice president's famous speech on unwed mothers and family values. Quayle's comments, aimed at single women who choose to give birth and raise children on their own, was prompted by television's "Murphy Brown," a sitcom starring Candice Bergen.

Also referring to Judith Wallerstein, whose writings chronicle the emotional devastation of divorce, Barber said: "Divorce is painful

and distressing but only a minority of children experience lasting problems."

Pointing to evidence that indicates most children of divorced parents show no serious, long-term problems, Barber outlined her three areas that lead to successful adjustment: maternal expectations, decision-making and responsibility and parent-child relationships.

Here are some excerpts of Barber's speech regarding these three areas:

1. Maternal expectations: "We read negative stories about divorced mothers who are raising kids on their own. It is not easy for them to deflect their stress, which, because of their circumstances, is caused by time management and financial problems.

"It is very important you help parents maintain the high standards. If the parent's expectations drop, the children will do worse. Even with everything going on, the parents must maintain high performance standards."

2. Decision-making and responsibility: "Two parents collaborate on decisions and on how much responsibility a child should have. Divorced mothers require more help from their children and involve them more in the decision-making process. It all depends on the timing and the climate and the

child's level of maturity. You can't let the child feel overburdened by too much responsibility. One quote I heard from an adolescent was: 'If (the divorce) was worse at the time, but I think it has made me a better, stronger person in the long run.'"

3. Parent-child relationships.

"After divorce, some relationships are worse, some are not. Since most women are the custodial parents, sometimes the father/child relationship fades out. Do kids need dads, anyway? Yes, most research says, yes. Even if they are not living with their fathers, children need dad's support. The best situation, if it can be done, is for the divorced couple to co-parent and make important decisions together.

"Research shows the relationship between the child and the custodial mom is shaky at first but after two years, it improves. Sometimes it is better than it was during the marriage."

Professor contests myths about kids of divorce

By JEFF WALSH

Times Leader Staff Writer

WILKES-BARRE — Children of divorce are portrayed as potential school drop-outs and pregnant teens who are likely to spend their adolescence depressed and delinquent.

Bonnie L. Barber says these negative characteristics thrown on children of divorce are startling, considering divorce rates are running at 50 percent.

"It seems that characterizing such a large number of families as somehow dysfunctional does them a serious disservice," said Barber, an assistant professor of human development at Penn State University.

Barber gave a speech Monday on "Divided Families: Promoting Successful Adjustment After Divorce" at the Family Service Association's 99th annual luncheon.

Challenging negative perceptions and media, Barber developed FAST (Families and Successful Teens) — a program of parallel groups for both parent and child. Prior programs have focused solely on



TIMES LEADER/FRED ADAMS

Guest speaker Bonnie Barber, left, talks Monday with Phyllis Belk, director of university relations at Penn State-Wilkes-Barre, and the Rev. Donald Lyon of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Wilkes-Barre, at the Family Service Association luncheon.

the individuals and didn't bring the parents and the teen together.

Barber's program was offered in the Wilkes-Barre area last year in a partner-

ship between Penn State and the Wilkes-Barre School District. Another course will be offered in the spring, meeting once a week for seven weeks.

T.L. 9-15-94