



# BANANA SPLITS

A school/parent support program for children of divorce

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For more information about *Banana Splits* and training opportunities, see:  
[www.BananaSplitsResourceCenter.org](http://www.BananaSplitsResourceCenter.org)

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# Preface

## Program meets ever-growing need

Originating as an elementary school program in a single school in 1978, the *Banana Splits* program is now in use in many states throughout the continental United States and Hawaii. It has grown through the enthusiasm and real determination of the many people who felt it would help kids. Counselors, nurses, parents, administrators, teachers, social workers, psychologists as well as graduate students have started successful groups. Thanks to each of them. Originally designed just for children with divorced parents, successful groups can also include “children who live with one parent or one at a time” for a variety of reasons

The expansion of the program has not kept pace with the need. 40% of marriages will fail, and just 60% of American children live with both biological parents according to the 2000 census. Children may live with a single parent, through divorce, death, or single parenting by choice; or with a parent and stepparent; or in some other family configuration involving separation from a parent.

*Banana Splits* is a small step in helping meet the multifaceted demands which are being placed on the schools.

Long-term research has pointed out that the period of greatest impact on the child of divorce is between age five (kindergarten) and eight (third or fourth grade). According to Linda Bird Frank in her book *Growing Up Divorced*, the negative effect of remarriage, which will affect one in six kids, is at its highest between ages nine (fourth and fifth grade) and 15 (high school).

To the child, divorce represents a trauma second only to the death of a parent. However, society has no child-appropriate ceremonies to mark the dissolution of a family. The child mourns alone, while the world around him barely acknowledges his grief. Until the child faces the relevant emotions, the past is carried around like excess baggage, even though the split may have happened many years before.

Divorce is a reality as fearful and terrifying to the elementary school child as the nuclear bomb threat is to the “No Nukes” supporters. Every child knows someone whose parents have split, and thus routine family arguments become even more threatening. To ignore the problem, figuring it will go away, is senseless. It is not going away.

Before the split, the “family” was the identifiable unit to the child. Although alcoholism, abuse, and rejection may have been present, to the young child it was a personal picture of family which provided a basis for perspective. The family had a history. At some future time, the “new” will become history, and thus comfortable, expected, and predicted. Even the “new” history, however, will change with the advent of a stepparent. Fifteen percent of all kids now live in step-families, and yet more live with one parent and visit the other parent in a stepfamily

If the child receives “Academy Award” support from parents and if everything goes as smoothly as possible, three to five years usually must pass for the child to regain the stability previously felt. From the schools’ perspective, there seems to be a paucity of “good” time when the child can give full attention to the child task of learning. Ample evidence of this problem is exhibited through decreased attendance, lowered test scores, behavior problems, and illness, as the child adjusts to the extra-school changes in his life. Perks that might have motivated a few marginal students do not work. This situation is demoralizing and problematic even to a good teacher. The teacher, already pressured by many demands, must now meet still another demand—the need to motivate a child whose only stability may be school.

It is the transitional period—the minimal three-year period of “emotional fog”—which is of initial concern to those working with kids. It is all too true that the child’s main concern is “Did dad send the alimony check?” not what happened to “Dick and Jane.” The child, again needing only to accomplish child tasks, is busily trying to survive, struggling to find a secure path leading back to a feeling of well-being. However, new changes often follow in the wake of death and divorce, which may require another period of adjustment: dating, remarriage, a second family split, the prospect of moving away from a struggling parent to attend college...

Because it establishes the peer support of kids who share feelings of loss and change, *Banana Splits* helps school-age children and youth regain a feeling of stability. Together they confront and learn to live with death, divorce, a missing parent, or remarriage. The young persons participate only when they feel comfortable. The ongoing nature of the group allows them to heal at their own pace.

The bright spot in all of this remains the kids. Their ability to cope, their flexibility, and their will to survive make each of us who comes in contact with them a little more humble.

It is to these kids who have written their words of hope, love, and frustration on the graffiti paper that this manual is really dedicated. May we continue to learn from them!



# Introduction

## Program philosophy

We believe we have a moral responsibility to help any child, in his own unique way, to adjust to the divorce or loss of parents. We can never give an answer to "Why me?" or remove the grief felt. But we can help the child moving through the stages of "Why me?" to "Who knows why?" to ultimately accepting that since *it* is not going away, "I *can* do something to make myself feel better."

We know children are remarkably resilient and strong. They already possess the coping skills, which have only to be refocused in a positive way. Most of all, kids don't want to hurt. They just want to be happy. They will heal as quickly as possible, and we as adults must trust their desire to do this.

Since the reality of the split can't be changed by any child-appropriate behavior, finding an answer to the question "What can be done to make me feel better?" is an exercise in problem solving. Successful resolution of a current problem rests on a positive solution to a previous problem. The ultimate long-term goal is the ability to live life more productively.

We are not talking about deep psychic resolutions, but about school support, as the child with his own sense of timing returns to the task at hand, *being a child*. We can help him begin to resolve some of the issues by being aware of the problems and patterns surrounding any separation. Unfortunately, when we see a well-dressed child, we assume an "intact" child. There are no obvious evidences, no clues of hurt, but they are there. If marriage has been the expected family framework, the split is traumatic for rich and poor alike. The kids share the emotional hurt and confusion of a "life gone wrong," regardless of family background.

Certainly split kids are scared kids, for life is not as predictable and certain. One does not ask a split about being scared. Rather one asks, "What do you do when you are scared?" Kids build up a backlog of survival tactics: hiding in closets or under beds, climbing up trees, daydreaming, watching TV. All are coping methods. The child whose family has changed through parental remarriage not only must adjust to the new "step," but also must complete the process of mourning for



the old family. To try to motivate these children, as they exist in their unique but divorce-universal instability, can be related to asking an adult standing outside in a thunderstorm to recall the capitals of the states.



We believe in the ongoing visible presence of the group so that it is available as the child needs it. Unlike a time-limited group, *Banana Splits* is always there, even next year or the year after.

We who work with these kids realize that separation is a crisis for any child, and parental remarriage may, just as easily, produce another crisis. Furthermore, as children's brains develop they reach new awareness of their own loss and how they are perceived by their peers.

We can help these kids as we teach them, and in many cases we must help them in order to teach them. Accepting the effects of a split is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity for the successful achievement of long-term educational goals. The role of education and parent/child relationships are not separate, non-related entities. To expect any of the institutions involved to function in isolation is fallacious. The whole is more than the sum of the separate institutions.

## Program history

Our experience with high school kids identified adolescents whose anger regarding divorce had become directed at themselves as well as at those around them. Their "normal" teenage rebellions seemed more intense and more destructive. It became obvious that the proximity of the parental split or remarriage was not the only issue. A youth whose parents had split years before might be as upset as one whose parents had split only months before. The concerns of these kids were valid to them. Whether the concerns were based in reality or not was not the issue. Their actions were often directed at "getting back at," "proving to," or any of a multiplicity of "gotchas."

Since the teen's life was affected socially and educationally, we began to wonder about *early* intervention. In 1978 we started a nameless peer support group with four fifth-grade girls. This program increased the next year to eight children and has been "snowballing" ever since.

The name *Banana Splits* was chosen as a reflection of what had proven to be the nature of the group. These were "up" kids, living in a crazy situation, but surviving, and surviving well for the most part. The title *Banana Splits* made a statement that was both positive (the

love of ice cream is a child's birthright) and realistic (splits stated the reality that these kids' families had split). The message was clear. This was not a group to be pitied, for their self-image as a group was positive, both to themselves and to the world. The parental split had caused major life changes that are not historically supported by family traditions.

A splits child can be referred into the group by a parent, staff member, or brought in by a peer. Our administration felt that an initial visit did not require parental permission. However, if the child wanted to continue, the parent must be contacted. This contact accomplished three things:

1. receiving of input from the parent,
2. clarifying the collaboration between home and school in this specific area, and
3. encouraging communication at home as beneficial for the child.

In spite of the confidential relationship within the group, parental support was and remains fantastic. Parents were assured that if there was a crisis, they would be contacted. Because the children would be aware of this decision, their trust remained. Elementary school children are not involved in the intense dependent/independent struggle of teenagers; they know that they are not independent and can admit this need freely, thus facilitating parental involvement on the elementary level. By contrast, on the secondary level parental permission may or may not be needed, depending upon school policy.

Even the youngest child has been able to honor the trust of the group and clearly understands that things discussed within the group are not to be shared with the outside world. However, the child is encouraged to share his input at home.

### **Child needs to belong**

The "secrecy component," for the lack of a better name, supports the child's need to "belong to a club" with its attendant rules and regulations. But to validate its existence for this reason detracts from the child's real empathy and respect for peers. Both the sharing of emotions and the acceptance of the universality of hurts and fears is sacred. Permission is given and supported to expose one's feelings, unencumbered by a need to protect oneself.

The balance between allowing expression of oneself and chaos presented a real management challenge. Fifth-grade girls sat, talked, or did projects; fifth-grade boys pushed, pinched, or propelled themselves, their words, or their projects. Clearly stated limits allowed the children to monitor themselves. The choice to leave or stay was reiterated.



# Elementary School

## How to set up an elementary program

Follow these steps in organizing *Banana Splits* in an elementary school.

### ■ Step 1: Contact parents

Initial contact made with the PTA/PTO, as well as a few split/step-parents, offers a wide avenue for support. An announcement is then made to all parents through the menu or newsletter, which tells them that the group will be starting. Explain that since the group will meet during school hours, transportation is not a problem. The school does not want to take the parent's place; it only wants to facilitate the communication between the child and the home. Parents are encouraged to contact the person who will head the group. The following areas should be clarified during the initial contact:

- The reason for the group;
- The proposed population (kids with problems; not problem kids);
- Parameters of parent confidentiality;
- Parameters of child confidentiality;
- Procedure for parent notification in case of non-resolved issues;
- Encouragement to keep in contact with any related concerns.

### ■ Step 2: Gather children to participate

Gathering children is easy. It takes no more than a few kids in each class to find friends and pass the word. *Banana Splits* is a group for any kid whose family structure has changed. Living with a single parent, a stepparent, a grandparent, all are valid prerequisites for membership. We have easily absorbed children who have lost a parent through death. Processing of their grief is not vastly different from the child whose parents have split.

Have staff members suggest names of kids whom they know to be eligible.

Get the administration to agree to allow a child to attend one session without parental permission; but any subsequent attendance would require a written note or phone call from the parent or guardian. Parents often call after the child has described the program, for the very name causes confusion. A crucial point is that the child is motivated to discuss the program at home. We have found that a child's enthusiasm lessens parental wariness.

### Step 3: Determine size and grouping

Do not include kindergarten in *Banana Splits* because the half-day session presents scheduling problems. Keep first graders together since they have historically been seen as an entity. Grades two and three can be combined, depending on numbers. Fourth and fifth graders may be combined, but be aware they have consistently requested a boy/girl division, which may be wise for sixth graders as well.

*Try not to intrude on the regular school day if you can help it. If a teacher has been ordered to allow attendance from his class and does not believe the program worthwhile academically, the child will suffer, for a tacit message will be passed to the child that being in Splits is not a priority.*

### Step 4: Establish frequency and time of meetings

Schedule meetings biweekly during lunch, whenever possible, for approximately 30 minutes. Kids eating lunch together has proven to be a nonthreatening, though sometimes messy, environment for discussion and doing the projects. When this is not possible, set up an alternative time after school.



*Do not hesitate to remove a student from your group who does not "fit." We removed one third grader from his peers because his peers were so angry and unstable, whereas he had stabilized. We put him with a group of more stable fourth and fifth graders where he fit in better emotionally.*

### Step 5: Determine the size of your group

We have determined that the maximum size should be no more than 10, although we did make one exception for a group of 14 fifth graders who shared a common history and who were one of the most productive groups we have had. Some groups can function effectively with just a few members, but other groups are threatened by less than five. The appropriate size for your group will become quickly evident to you. Whatever you can manage *comfortably* is the right size group.