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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

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Introduction

Program philosophy

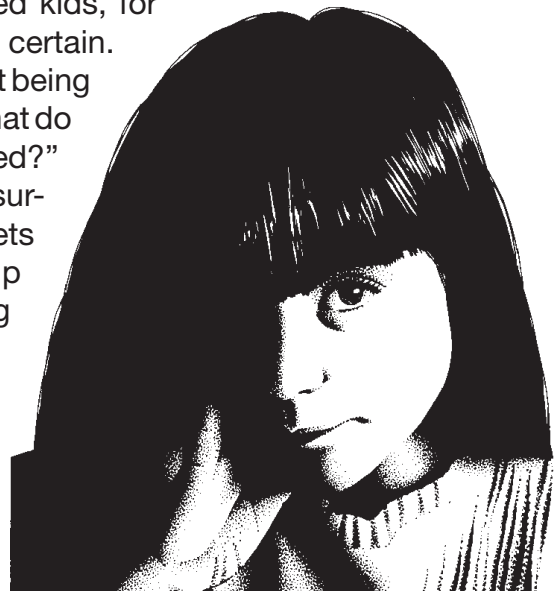
We believe we have a moral responsibility to help any child, in his own unique way, to adjust to the divorce or loss of parents. We can never give an answer to “Why me?” or remove the grief felt. But we can help the child moving through the stages of “Why me?” to “Who knows why?” to ultimately accepting 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.

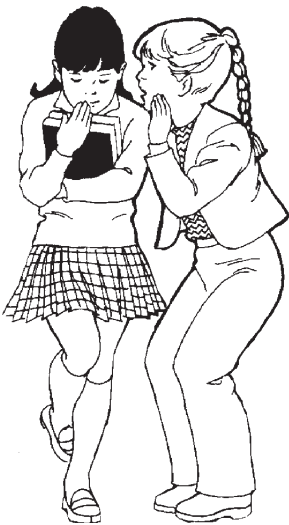
In spite of the confidential relationship within the group, parental support was and remains fantastic. Parents were assured that if there was a crisis, they would be contacted. Because the children would be aware of this decision, their trust remained. Elementary school children are not involved in 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.



The group was designed for peer support, which couldn't take place in chaos. Additionally, a child who was disruptive was not banished forever. Because the group was important to all, the responsibility for maintenance was shared between the leader and the kids.

Teachers in the project often had parents who had split, or who themselves were divorced. They were willing to serve as role models throughout the year and were eager participants at the end-of-year picnic.

As to time, we originally restricted a child's participation in *Banana Splits* to one year, feeling that this period would offer sufficient time for confronting most issues. In addition, it would lessen group size, simplify scheduling, and allow for a certain duplication of materials. But three factors caused reconsideration:

1. The children wanted and seemed to need the program the following year.
2. The "old-timers" presented experience in the form of child-wisdom, gained from activities such as, "I am going to my fifth court hearing."
3. We came to realize that rather than being separate issues divorce and remarriage were parts of the child's problem-solving continuum.

We finally recognized two things: 1) peer support was needed as the child processed the meaning of family; and 2) this act could not be done in one year. These conclusions have been substantiated by the ongoing attendance and by the program's expansion. The average length of consistent attendance is three years. In addition we have had a number who "drop-in as needed."

Educational system advantages

The advantage to the school system of the *Banana Splits* program is manyfold. The most obvious is that the child's learning potential is supported as he begins to rid himself of the heavy baggage of the divorce. The materials and support people are already on the payroll, not necessarily teachers, but individuals who have the trust of the child. However, the participation of all staff members is not necessary, though their support is desirable.

For those staff members for whom counselling kids might prove difficult, the staff development component provides exposure to examples of relevant stereotyped thinking about divorce. In addition, this program teaches that recognition of the new meaning of "family" supports the children. Participants learn that counselling is only one part of the teacher input and that awareness of the problem is equally valuable. Indirectly the teachers are supported, for the unmotivated child is no longer seen as a reflection of the teacher's inability to



help the student. No longer is the angry parent necessarily perceived as angry at the teacher. Nonteaching personnel are also helped in understanding changes in a child's life—be it a bus change or more frequent visits to a nurse. Finally, through the school's acceptance of the preponderance and reality of divorce, parents feel supported in their struggles for stability.

In conclusion, the high visibility, continuity, and positive nature of the group all reinforce the concepts that "life goes on" and that we all must learn to cope. As for the kids, they are givers, and therefore they are entitled to the spoils. They gain feelings that they are secure, that they like their peers, and that they *can* and *are* surviving. They know this task will not be simple, but they sense it will be possible to handle. They learn that talking and trusting beats anger and destruction. The child, through support and his own effort, earns the rewards of feeling better, which to many of these hurting kids is equal to a straight A average. The stigma of divorce is reduced as this cry illustrates: "You mean all these bananas are kids like me?"

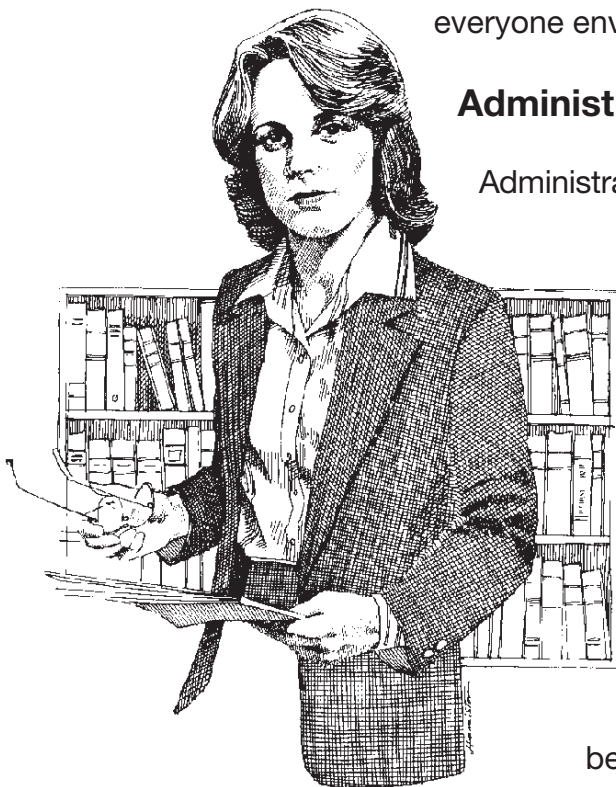
All kids in the school profit as they learn to accept that difference is okay. The presence of so many survivors lessens, if not the terror of divorce, the dread of being unique, of being ashamed.

The year-end picnic of pizza and banana splits reinforces the belief that "Emotions are for handling, but handle them with care." The non-split children are aware that the picnic is an earned treat, given only to those who are willing to work hard to help themselves feel better. Since many of the splits are school leaders, in athletic as well as scholastic areas, the sharing of feelings is accepted as positive and everyone envies their enjoyment of pizza and banana splits!

Administrators' concerns

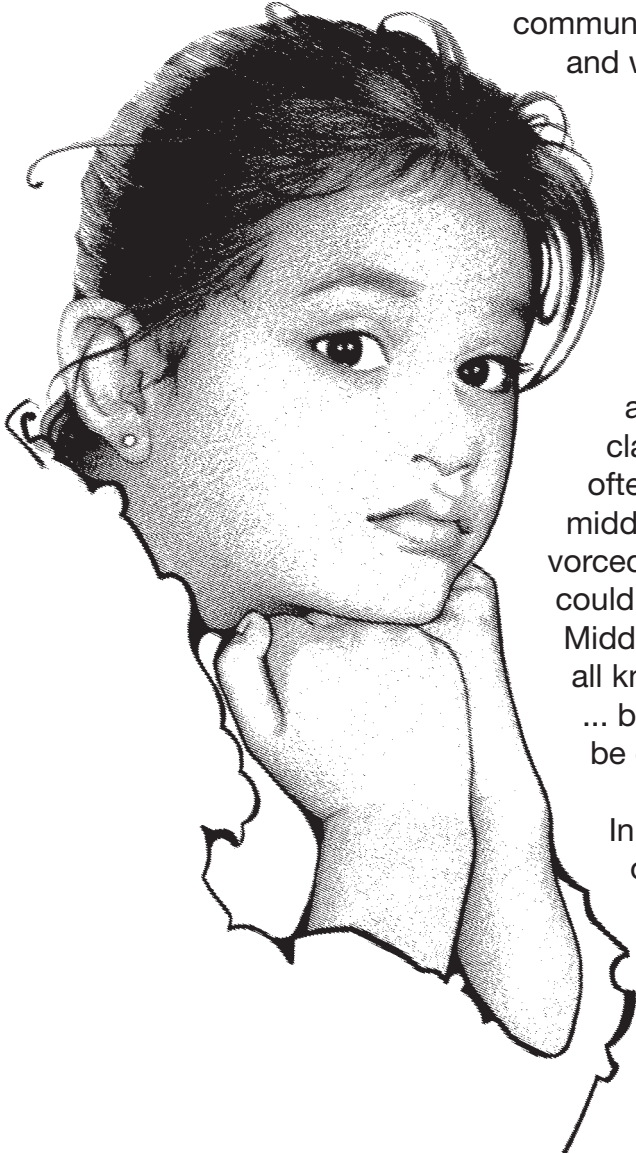
Administrators are pulled in one way by a population demanding more and better education, and in another way by teachers demanding limits and support. The frustration of administrators is equalled only by the frustration of teachers.

Teachers cannot be expected to function without support, as they are attacked by angry parents whose own hectic lives may be causative factors of the anger. One could safely assume 15 years ago that children, from almost any but an economically deprived family, had reasonable support, including a home, a place in which to study, and a degree of consistency. Today, however, when many children are either moving between two homes or are being pulled apart by



people living in two homes, the previous expectations are no longer justified. Many teachers witness the effects of these tensions and feel increasingly frustrated by their inability to reach kids in traditional ways. Because little research has been done on how divorce affects schools, teachers and staff are left with the queasy feeling that something is wrong, but they have no plan to do anything about it.

Educators, lamenting students' lack of motivation and parents' lack of support, are frustrated over small turnouts for important meetings. One hears comments that kids are "bad" because they forget assignments and lunch monies. There is a general erg of "they don't care"—be it administration, kids, or parents. Principals and communities are blamed, educators become polarized, and we are still left with an unmotivated kid.



Dealing with lack of motivation is a particular problem for the staff member who cannot reconcile the picture of a broken-home child with his traditional class population. A vast number of negatives about "kids and parents" made by a previously good teacher may be a symptom of confrontation with nontraditional population, as in not being able to "fit" the nice clean middle-class child into a "broken-home" stereotype. One often hears stated, in reference to a no-problem middle-class kid, "I never knew her parents were divorced" (e.g., she is clean, looks well fed, etc.). "How could anyone so normal be from a broken home?" Middle-class and upper-class parents have, as we all know, stereotypical images. "Nice parents didn't ... but now they do." Thus, we aren't quite ready to be comfortable with the change.

In an attempt to understand the multiple needs of the education-child-family triangle, teachers need to be aware of the ripple effect of divorce. Teachers are not trained to be counselors, and being involved in the domestic crises of children is not a condition for tenure. But lack of awareness of the problem is a sure component of burnout. Burnout affects the system in ways obvious to us all.

Staff support

Teacher awareness and support: Since the primary purpose of a school is to educate, the *Banana Splits* program is an ancillary service. Administrators are aware that divorce affects a child's motivation, and that lack of motivated children affects teachers. Although the program may receive administrative approval, unless the staff supports the program, it is doomed. We have found that teachers are already aware that "Something is different." However, what they are not always aware that what they are observing is how the continuum of divorce affects many children.

Staff meetings: In *Banana Splits* we recommend two staff meetings, the first dealing with the impact of divorce and the second discussing the program's goals. (Material for staff development is in Tab 6.) From these two meetings teachers gain a *beginning understanding* of the problem. Two things are clarified for the teachers: 1) that divorce is a reality; and 2) that the problems they are witnessing will be escalating not diminishing. This understanding helps teachers to begin to refocus. They are not being asked to do "one more thing," but rather they will be learning how to handle what they already have.

Staff handling of a "split child": When a staff member realizes that a child's parents have recently split, the alternatives are basic: ignore or confront. The underlying assumption is similar to that which pertains to a child's participation in the *Banana Splits* program: those staff members who are comfortable confronting will confront, and those who feel school is only for "education," or who do not want to confront, will not confront. For those staff members who feel comfortable addressing the problem, the following guidelines are offered.

- Tell the child simply that you realize his life has had a big change. By handling the split only by acknowledging a basic truth—life has changed—the child is left free to concur with the reality of the split. The emotionally packed words "My parents have divorced" or "Dad/mom have left" are not used. Consequently, the child neither needs to be defensive nor is being pushed into accepting a fact before he is ready. The child is free to share, realizing that the teacher is attuned to the uncertainty which he is feeling. If the child feels free to talk when he is ready, he will. The door has been opened, and control has been given back to the child.
- Accepting that the initial reaction of a child to a split is a feeling of loss/change allows us to successfully focus on one-half of his emotional baggage. We cannot reduce his loss. Only the child is aware of the depth of his emptiness.

Encourage the child to take control of that within his area of control.

- The child whose parents split several months before and who, through coping techniques, evidences behavioral/motivational change can be confronted in a similar way. “I know after parents split or remarry, things can be rough.” This declaration of a simple fact lessens the need for the child to be defensive. The staff person is addressing not the problem areas (e.g., daydreaming, aggression) but the underlying cause. With the acceptance of the split as a possible causal factor, the child can begin to focus on the specifics of behavior which he is able to change. It is important that the child for whom life seems out of control be encouraged to control areas which are appropriate. In this respect, the teacher’s role does not radically change. One does not “try to take the place of” nor does one get caught up in the child’s morass of feelings. The role is to be an empathic, non-judgmental listener.

Elicit “good” response, not “bad.”

- No parental judgment in the form of a “good guys”/“bad guys” position should be taken by a staff member for two very salient reasons:
 1. All observations are secondhand, received through biased parties; that is, the child, the parent, or a neighbor.
 2. If a teacher verbally commits to any position—dad is good or dad is bad—the child cannot freely change his view without justifying the change to the teacher. *The child needs to be free to spontaneously restructure loyalties in order to heal.* What the child needs most is a neutral zone. The rest of the world has taken sides. The child may say something like, “Dad called last night.” To say, “Wasn’t that nice,” is a message to the child—the teacher thinks it is nice. It is more productive to ask the child, “Is that good news or bad news?” The teacher remaining noncommittal allows the child to feel free to say, “No, it was awful!”

Empathy, not sympathy is needed.

- The concern of the teacher is to motivate the child. Sympathy prolongs suffering, whereas empathy encourages growth. To sympathize, giving the child the message of “You poor thing, broken home and all” allows him to wallow indefinitely. Saying, “I know it is hard for you (the child) but please try” is encouragement. Many kids have precious little energy left, and the thought of completing an assignment is overwhelming. In the background are the familiar voices of educators, “If I do this for one child, I have to do it for all.” True, but we have no choice if we really are concerned.

Patience is required.

- The child is responsible for trying. If the child trusts the teacher who may be his only stability, the child will try. For the majority of kids (and adults, too) production and reliability decrease under stress. The child whose identity was tied into a reasonable effort in school prior to the split will return to that position when the crisis has passed. Help the child take those steps which will help him begin to handle the problem in a way that is not self-destructive.

Require work to be done.

- By verbalizing that “A problem does exist which may make it more difficult to get work done,” the teacher is making a statement that “Work is to be done.” The child is redirected back to his area of child-appropriate control—school. Just as a physically handicapped child is not excused from all aspects of education, the child-in-crisis also has to fulfill requirements.

Authoritative measures seldom work.

- Guilt or threats such as “You should,” “You will be sent to the principal’s office,” or “Your parent will be contacted” do not motivate these kids. The rage of a principal is less meaningful than the feelings of their own rage, loss, and emptiness, as suggested by this statement, “I hate everyone except the dog!” In addition, if the child is trying to punish the “bad parents,” what better way than being a “bad” child? To try to motivate through authoritative measures seldom works and certainly not for long. Kids are good because they have more to gain; a child is often bad to support his self-image that he is bad.

Provide clear guidelines.

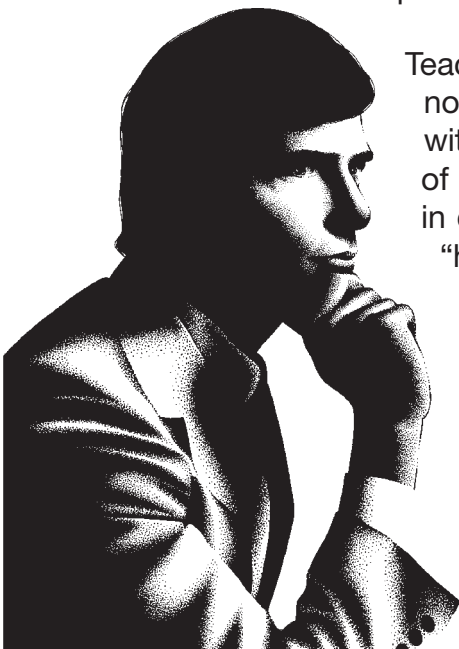
- The school can provide a counterpoint to change. For example, consistency. The structure of clear expectations and familiar routine provide the child with both limits and a feeling of safety.
- Help the child focus on what, if anything, he can do. Encourage the child to tackle the areas of control which are child-appropriate. Paying the mortgage and fixing the roof are adult problems. Schoolwork and handling negative emotions in a nondestructive way are child areas. Help the child to *partialize* and take those steps which will help him begin to handle the problem in a way that is not self-destructive.
- It is evident for some children-in-crisis that Friday afternoons and Monday mornings are lost times. The crucial point is that the teacher *not* address the child as *not* interested, *not* caring, or lazy, but rather acknowledge that *even* though it is a bad day, he is responsible for trying.
- The “non-parented child” during the first two years when communication with the parent is often felt to be lacking may say or do things for attention or sympathy. In this respect, the neutral-objective approach quickly pays off. The child is refocused on the task at hand—school—not that he is lazy or bad. The child needs attention, and positive reinforcement on tasks attempted/completed will often suffice to redirect the negative attention-seeking behavior.
- The child who manipulates at home will initially try the same approach in school. This child, as all kids, needs clear expectations, praise for things accomplished (or even given a committed attempt).

In summary, a teacher must be:

- neutral/objective
- empathic
- consistent
- open to letting the child learn to develop coping skills for his problem
- realistic in expectations
 - patient
 - attuned to marked (several day) behavior changes
 - supportive but not overprotective (a child in the school structure moves on at end of term)
 - aware that 99.9% of split kids within three years of the split are unsettled kids, and kids in newly reconstituted families are also unsettled
 - aware of terminology: “split” vs. “broken” ... “I expect you to” vs. “You should” ... “You don’t care about” vs. “You didn’t do the work”
 - aware of the child’s security needs, which may be almost ritualized: “Good morning” translates to “The teacher is still here”: “Good night” translates to “Hope to see you tomorrow.” This is far different in emotional meaning than the child whose life is in order, and who casually says, “Night.”

Potential roadblocks for this program

Administrator and teacher philosophies may produce divergence. As previously stated, administrators are caught between multi-factions, and the thought of willingly addressing a new need that is not screaming for attention is implausible. Staff time and budget limitations may be precluding success in already mandated areas.



Teachers, too, may feel that counseling and home awareness is not a component of education. They often are uncomfortable with the thought of being a parent pro tem beyond the parameter of normal school responsibilities. Teachers may feel untrained in counseling, and feel unsure of involving themselves with a “hurting child.” This uncertainty is compounded by the already existent barrage from the outside community requesting more education and higher test scores. There has been an erosion, in the eyes of many, of “teaching time.” Kids are pulled out for specials, for speech, for music lessons, all of which disrupt the teaching day.

Banana Splits, in the eyes of many, will be a “frill,” an unacceptable and certainly unconventional use of school time. It makes little sense for a child who is seemingly “in good shape” to make panic pencils or throw darts. The child’s later adjustment is not the immediate concern. Next Friday’s

spelling or tomorrow's book report are the teacher's immediate concerns. And then the fact that *Banana Splits* encourages responsibility seems to contract its outwardly free-wheeling appearance.

Specific areas have proved to be difficult for some staff members:

- Schools run on schedules, with attendance lists, clear assignments, and "sit in chair, right or wrong philosophies." *Banana Splits* appears to blatantly contradict that value system. There is *no* requirement that a split attend every week. They seldom sit still, unless working on a project, and there are no right and wrong, or fast agendas. The basic tenet of *Banana Splits* is that a child is involved because he *wants* to be. The element of choice and the absence of a list is difficult to fit into the educational setting.
- As most of the splits are "good" kids, it may be hard for a teacher to accept that they have a "need." In contrast, the "bad" kid cannot be forced to attend. The point is, *Banana Splits* is open to all children and youth who feel the need.

Staff development can really help teachers share with one another the pain that they sense many children are experiencing because of the problems facing the American family ...



- Teachers may see divorce as a one-shot problem. Thus, they argue that children whose parents divorced when they were five should not be in *Banana Splits* when they are 10. What they don't understand is that the "processing" of emotional material is not a list of words to be memorized as a one-shot fix. Rather children continue to need this processing as they mature.
- Some also fear that kids are in *Banana Splits* because it is fun! No greater compliment could there be. For many it is a social club, but they are responsible for the emotional dues. Emotional growth and problem-solving is often painful, but being with friends helps.

- The last and most difficult feeling is that school is for learning academics; it is not a mental health facility. Being a split is the parent's and child's problem, not the school's.

To address this last concern, we recognize our educational institutions are not medical facilities, but we do acknowledge somatic complaints, for we have nurses. We cannot put the child into an educational "mode" without accepting the impact of the other systems to which he belongs. As William Dwyer states in his book, *Your Erogenous Zones*, "The learners must decide to investigate ..., and no amount of teaching can make anything sink in. The more that self-reliance is cultivated in the learning process, the more effective the teaching." Helping a child take responsibility for those things which are child-appropriate, e.g., his attitude, his homework, his outlook, is in the best educational interest of both teacher and child. Fortunately, problems are minimal. The majority of staff, both teaching and nonteaching, have been extremely supportive of this program's philosophy and practice. And once staff support is present, the formation of a group is not difficult.



Staff development will help your teachers rally behind you.