

Fractured families

Talking makes a difference for Wheeler's students

By CAROL CHANG
Staff Writer

CENTRAL

With so many of today's children living in broken homes, the school setting provides one of the only constraints in their lives. Some schools in Hawaii have also become the place where these young victims of divorce can find help, not just art out their problems.

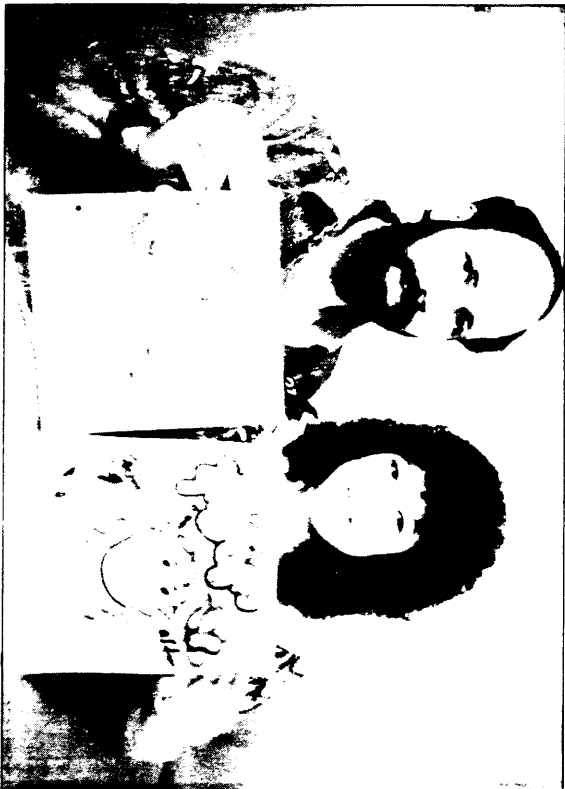
Kamrehe psychologist Robert Wolver and his wife, Gail, who is a teacher at Kamehameha Schools, have conducted children's divorce groups at Wheeler Intermediate School for the past two years, getting a positive response for the support groups from both students and parents.

"Some parents want to enroll their younger ones when they reach Wheeler," said Gail of the private program, which is offered through the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology, a Kamehameha graduate school where her husband is dean.

Another program, Banana Splits, is supported by federal money from Chapter II. In the past two years, it has been introduced in a dozen Hawaii schools by trained counselors who provide "recess," "rap groups" for youngsters in transition through divorce, death or remarriage in their families.

Studies predict that nearly half of all children will experience divorce in their families before they reach age 18. But Wolver sees how that abstract statistic shows up in concrete ways, such as crime reports and school drop out rates.

Yet many troubled children are overlooked by busy school counselors and upset parents. They don't cause trouble or talk out, they're just quiet and withdrawn.



Richard Ambo photo

PAIN AIDES: Robert and Gail Wolver have just completed a support group program at Wheeler Intermediate School for children of divorced parents. The two display some of the students' art work drawn during the sessions.

"The quiet failures," Wolver calls them.

"The odds are they don't talk about it with others, just at the time when they need more communication, they won't tell parents, their feelings," he explained. "They need more parenting but there's less to give. What we do is build a support system at the school so they can talk to each other."

Experts say that divorce is hardest on kids between the ages

of 7 and 13 — the ones who are old enough to understand the concept of divorce, but not old enough to deal with their feelings about it. They have different ways of expressing their unhappiness. Besides lower grades and withdrawal from friends, the Wolvers said there can be behavioral disturbances and physical complaints.

So, at the request of parents and Wheeler's counselors, they began a series of weekly 50-

minute talk sessions after classes at the Mililani school in the spring of 1987. There were seven structured meetings with a group of six to eight students.

More groups formed this year and the prospects for continuing next year are good. The Wolvers remain available for follow-up call to report their progress or setbacks.

Principal Paul Misaoka supports the Wolvers' program because, he believes, the students must become survivors. "In the long run they have to realize things and learn to adjust. We're afraid of that depressed state where they go into a shell and have thoughts of suicide. If the group teaches that divorce isn't all bad."

The students become close, opening up to each other through discussion — which is never forced — in comfortable surroundings. They draw pictures, watch films, write scripts and act out scenes common to fractured and blended families. There is one session just for figuring out what all the terms mean.

"They have very original ideas about alimony, custody, child support and the courts," Gail said.

Playdough is another useful medium that lets each child "mold" family members and arrange them in relationship to each other. Students are then able to sympathize with each other about their families. "I know how you feel and this is how I handled it," is a frequent starting point for friendship and healing.

In Banana Splits groups, the structure and mood are a bit more laid-back, at least with school counselor Tom Aitken's gang at Ahumahu Elementary in the Windward District. He has six different age-level groups that meet with him for lunchtime talks every two weeks. Their names are written on 99 bright yellow paper bananas (about one-sixth of the school population).

"It's completely voluntary for them," Aitken said of the meetings. "It's an outlet, a way to make them feel special. We don't go into the smut. They do spill

milk on my carpet though," he added.

A typical Splits session could bring seven squirming 10-year-olds together to talk about what they do when they're scared at night. ("Get a knife... Watch TV...") ("Call my dad?") Then they break forward about "Being Rude" — some curled up with Aitken on the floor, others playing with toys from a nearby shelf.

In the case of both counseling programs, the personal experience of the group leaders has enhanced their ability to empathize with the children and gain their trust.

The Wolvers are a blended family. It is the second marriage for both, and children from each side are now living under one roof and working things out.

Aitken comes from a broken home — his father left the family when Aitken was two years old. He remembers feeling angry during all the years before they met again.

"You couldn't even talk about divorce in those days," said the 38-year-old bachelor, who seems to talk about it every day now.

The two support groups emphasize prevention, not crisis intervention. But in their private practice, the Wolvers often see young patients after hostilities and unresolved conflicts have plagued them for several years.

Aitken worries that he's missing children who need his help. He must balance the needs of 67 children at the school.

It's his guess that there may be another 99 who should be referred to Banana Splits. Some tell him that they wish their folks would get divorced. Others worry that they may have to drop out of the group if the parents reconcile.