

61.21 Parenting course authorized; fees; required attendance authorized; contempt.—

(1) LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS; PURPOSE.—It is the finding of the Legislature that:

(a) A large number of children experience the separation or divorce of their parents each year. Parental conflict related to divorce is a societal concern because children suffer potential short-term and long-term detrimental economic, emotional, and educational effects during this difficult period of family transition. This is particularly true when parents engage in lengthy legal conflict.

(b) Parents are more likely to consider the best interests of their children when determining parental arrangements if courts provide families with information regarding the process by which courts make decisions on issues affecting their children and suggestions as to how parents may ease the coming adjustments in family structure for their children.

(c) It has been found to be beneficial to parents who are separating or divorcing to have available an educational program that will provide general information regarding:

1. The issues and legal procedures for resolving time-sharing and child support disputes.
2. The emotional experiences and problems of divorcing adults.
3. The family problems and the emotional concerns and needs of the children.
4. The availability of community services and resources.

(d) Parents who are separating or divorcing are more likely to receive maximum benefit from a program if they attend such program at the earliest stages of their dispute, before extensive litigation occurs and adversarial positions are assumed or intensified.

(2) The Department of Children and Families shall approve a parenting course which shall be a course of a minimum of 4 hours designed to educate, train, and assist divorcing parents in regard to the consequences of divorce on parents and children.

(a) The parenting course referred to in this section shall be named the Parent Education and Family Stabilization Course and may include, but need not be limited to, the following topics as they relate to court actions between parents involving custody, care, time-sharing, and support of a child or children:

1. Legal aspects of deciding child-related issues between parents.
2. Emotional aspects of separation and divorce on adults.
3. Emotional aspects of separation and divorce on children.
4. Family relationships and family dynamics.
5. Financial responsibilities to a child or children.
6. Issues regarding spousal or child abuse and neglect.
7. Skill-based relationship education that may be generalized to parenting, workplace, school, neighborhood, and civic relationships.

(b) Information regarding spousal and child abuse and neglect shall be included in every parent education and family stabilization course. A list of local agencies that provide assistance with such issues shall also be provided.

(c) The parent education and family stabilization course shall be educational in nature and shall not be designed to provide individual mental health therapy for parents or children, or individual legal advice to parents or children.

(d) Course providers shall not solicit participants from the sessions they conduct to become private clients or patients.

(e) Course providers shall not give individual legal advice or mental health therapy.

(3) Each course provider offering a parenting course pursuant to this section must be approved by the Department of Children and Families.

(a) The Department of Children and Families shall provide each judicial circuit with a list of approved course providers and sites at which the parent education and family stabilization course may be completed. Each judicial circuit must make information regarding all course providers approved for their circuit available to all parents.

(b) The Department of Children and Families shall include on the list of approved course providers and sites for each circuit at least one site in that circuit where the parent education and family stabilization course may be completed on a sliding fee scale, if available.

(c) The Department of Children and Families shall include on the list of approved course providers, without limitation as to the area of the state for which the course is approved, a minimum of one statewide approved course to be provided through the Internet and one statewide approved course to be provided through correspondence. The purpose of the Internet and correspondence courses is to ensure that the parent education and stabilization course is available in the home county of each state resident and to those out-of-state persons subject to this section.

(d) The Department of Children and Families may remove a provider who violates this section, or its implementing rules, from the list of approved court providers.

(e) The Department of Children and Families shall adopt rules to administer subsection (2) and this subsection.

(4) All parties to a dissolution of marriage proceeding with minor children or a paternity action that involves issues of parental responsibility shall be required to complete the Parent Education and Family Stabilization Course prior to the entry by the court of a final judgment. The court may excuse a party from attending the parenting course, or from completing the course within the required time, for good cause.

(5) All parties required to complete a parenting course under this section shall begin the course as expeditiously as possible. For dissolution of marriage actions, unless excused by the court pursuant to subsection (4), the petitioner must complete the course within 45 days after the filing of the petition, and all other parties must complete the course within 45 days after service of the petition. For paternity actions, unless excused by the court pursuant to subsection (4), the petitioner must complete the course within 45 days after filing the petition, and any other party must complete the course within 45 days after an acknowledgment of paternity by that party, an adjudication of paternity of that party, or an order granting time-sharing to or support from that party. Each party to a dissolution or paternity action shall file proof of compliance with this subsection with the court prior to the entry of the final judgment.

(6) All parties to a modification of a final judgment involving a parenting plan or a time-sharing schedule may be required to complete a court-approved parenting course prior to the entry of an order modifying the final judgment.

(7) A reasonable fee may be charged to each parent attending the course.

(8) Information obtained or statements made by the parties at any educational session required under this statute shall not be considered in the adjudication of a pending or subsequent action, nor shall any report resulting from such educational session become part of the record of the case unless the parties have stipulated in writing to the contrary.

(9) The court may hold any parent who fails to attend a required parenting course in contempt, or that parent may be denied shared parental responsibility or time-sharing or otherwise sanctioned as the court deems appropriate.

(10) Nothing in this section shall be construed to require the parties to a dissolution of marriage to attend a court-approved parenting course together.

(11) The court may, without motion of either party, prohibit the parenting course from being taken together, if there is a history of domestic violence between the parties.

History.—s. 1, ch. 94-185; s. 13, ch. 98-403; s. 75, ch. 2003-402; s. 8, ch. 2005-239; s. 15, ch. 2008-61; s. 7, ch. 2009-180; s. 24, ch. 2014-19.