



Attorney offers 'SMILE' tips in children's book

By Tom Kirvan
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It's an interesting bit of math in the title of the soon-to-be-released children's book, "You and Me Make Three."

Fortunately, readers of the book will discover that the title more than adds up to an insightful and helpful look at the world of divorce through the eyes of those left in the wake.

The brainchild of Bloomfield Hills matrimonial attorney Richard Victor, the book is a collaborative effort of co-authors Wendy Lokken, Gwendy Mangiamele, Edna Cucksey Stephens, and illustrator Heather Drescher. Its central character is "B.B. the Bear," a "special friend" for kids to "talk to when divorce happens in their families." From the mouth of a bear come words that are meant to ease a child's transition into life in separate homes.

"Even though you may not all live in the same home, both your parents still love you just as they always have," B.B. says in the opening page of the beautifully illustrated book. "I will be a reminder of how much your Mom and Dad love you. When you take me to your Mom's . . . you and me make three. And when you take me to your Dad's . . . you and me make three too!"

The book, according to Victor, was inspired by Michael O'Dea and Mia Johnson, two youngsters "who want to help other kids cope with divorce," particularly the "hard times" that can fracture a family for years to come. On Victor's part, the book was written with a "SMILE" in mind.

SMILE is an acronym for "Start Making It Livable for Everyone," the program co-founded by

Victor and Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Edward Sosnick. Now in its 17th year, the program has attained national and international stature, and is an educational series for divorcing parents with children under the age of 18. In Oakland County alone, more than 100,000 adults have attended SMILE programs since its inception, according to Victor. Five years ago, the program gained a foothold in Australia and now is offered by the government there, he indicated. "The underlying theme of SMILE is to teach parents that the greatest gift they can give their children is the right to love the other parent," Victor says. "Parents learn that even though they may no longer be marriage partners, they will always be parent partners for their children." B.B. is the cuddly protagonist in the book, which will be sold for \$19.95, while the bear is priced at \$15.95. They both will be for sale through national outlets such as Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and Border's, but not until the national book launch scheduled by the publisher for March 2008 in Naples, Fla. Pre-orders for the book and the bear can be placed locally by contacting the Victor Smile Foundation at (248) 646-7177 (www.victorsmilefoundation.org), EDCO Publishing at (248) 475-4678, or by going to www.BBseries.com. For all pre-orders, the book will be available by mid-December, although the bear will not be available until mid-January, according to Victor. "Since I'm your best bear friend, you can whisper in my ear and tell me your biggest secrets," says B.B. in the opening chapter of the book. "You can talk to me about how you feel, tell me your silliest jokes and even toss me in the air. It's good to have a furry friend who is . . . always there!"

On each facing page of the book is "B.B.'s SMILE Tip for Parents," a carefully crafted message written by Victor. A sample tip: "When children have regular routines, they are less likely to be overwhelmed by the changes separation brings," Victor says. "In addition to fun activities, both parents should establish 'normal' routines with chores, bedtime rules, standards for behavior, and regular meals to help children feel stable and secure." The book offers a glimpse at the daily lives of kids—at home, at play, at school, and with relatives, especially their grandparents. It also addresses the need for parents to be "sensitive when introducing new boyfriends or girlfriends and their families to children," noting that "new relationships may contribute to their sense of insecurity and instability." It closes with the 10-point "Children's Bill of Rights" that underlines the SMILE program.

Perhaps uppermost, according to Victor, is the "10th Amendment" to the Bill of Rights: "The right to experience regular and consistent contact with both parents and to be protected from parental disputes or disagreements."

"The book really was designed with a dual purpose in mind," says Victor. "We wanted to create a book that would be useful for young children whose parents are divorced or are in the process of divorce. We also wanted to offer a book that would be an educational tool for parents, to give them a better understanding of how divorce looks through the eyes of children. It's important for them to put their own feelings aside and to begin to appreciate how the divorce has impacted their children. No child adjusts to divorce until the parents do."

Victor began his legal career in 1975 after graduating from Detroit College of Law. Last year, he was named the Fellow of the Year by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, and is a nationally recognized advocate for the rights of grandparents and stepparents in divorce and custody cases. The audience he hopes to reach with the book includes family law attorneys, social workers, psychologists, and, of course, children and parents involved in the inherently difficult circumstances surrounding divorce. He has created a nonprofit organization that has applied for tax exempt status, as a 501 (c) (3) known as the Victor SMILE Foundation, which will receive 100 percent of the royalties he receives from the sale of the book.

"The Foundation will provide support, through its programs and teachings, which will help families, otherwise in dysfunction, learn to cope with each other and how parents can both work together to help their children through this most difficult time in their lives," says Victor, who indicated that through his foundation he hopes the book will make its way into every library and school in the U.S.

"This is not a money-making venture for me. It's all about education and hopefully making the lives of children affected by divorce much better."