

# Help for Muslim children caught in divorces

New rules require couples to submit co-parenting plan before court action

Published on May 28, 2014 1:49 AM

By Janice Tai

WHEN Rina Nur Ferbrina's parents decided to divorce four years ago, the then 15-year-old had to care for her two toddler brothers single-handedly while her older brother was in jail.

"No one was there to listen to how I felt," said Rina, whose mother and father spent their days quarrelling over money and affairs.

"Even when my younger siblings were hungry, I had to speak up for them and ask for money to buy food, or they would be forgotten."

Cases such as this have prompted the Syariah Court to help Muslim children caught in the crossfire of divorce proceedings.

Yesterday, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim announced two new measures at a seminar on managing divorces at Furama City Centre.

From early next year, divorcing couples with children aged below 18 will be required to submit co-parenting plans before court proceedings begin. These may include housing, education or financial arrangements.

Marriage counsellors will be trained to work with such couples to draw them up.

The Syariah Court will also partner self-help group Mendaki to refer clients with children to Malay-Muslim organisations and other agencies for on-the-spot information on issues, including financial and educational ones.

"The divorce of parents hurts the family, even if it is amicable," said Dr Yaacob.

"The impact can continue with the children into adulthood. Research has shown that those who experience divorce as children face challenges breaking the cycle in adulthood."

The Muslim court is taking the lead on this issue. There are no similar requirements or support structures in place for non-Muslim divorces.

The Muslim court had previously taken similar measures, such as by referring cases of couples with children to the Housing Board so that they could receive guidance on their post-divorce housing arrangements.

It is also partnering social service agencies to prepare social welfare reports, which will help the court make informed decisions in cases of child custody disputes.

More than 1,500 Muslim couples have divorced each year over the past three years, with more than 2,000 children affected by these cases.

Counsellors and lawyers say children can often be used as a "bargaining chip".

Family lawyer Abdul Rahman said: "Some parents also try to buy their child over by getting them gifts or being more lenient and hoping the child will choose them over the other parent, instead of listening to what the child really wants or needs."

Counsellor Norsiah Rejab from the Association of Muslim Professionals works with children on art pieces or with a doll house to get a handle on their thoughts.

"The way a child picks out three dolls - representing the couple and her dad's girlfriend - and arranges them in the toy house tells us something," she explained.

"It is also revealing when a child draws horns on the father's head symbolising the devil."

Rina, now a 19-year-old housewife, used to isolate herself when she felt no one was listening.

She would even slash her arms.

"When my parents quarrelled about money and hurt each other, it hurt me too. I just needed them to love and respect me and be responsible for one another in the family," she said.

[jantai@sph.com.sg](mailto:jantai@sph.com.sg)