



Ellen Bruno



Christina McGhee

# Conversation and Compassion

An Interview with **ELLEN BRUNO** and  
**CHRISTINA MCGHEE** on Their Upcoming Film  
“SPLIT: A Film for Kids of Divorce (and their Parents)”

BY HEATHER HETCHLER

**D**ivorce. It permeates our society, yet the conversation surrounding it doesn't meet the needs of our children or support them as they transition through this life change.

“SPLIT” is a documentary about divorce from the child's perspective by filmmaker and producer, Ellen Bruno, who collaborated with Christina McGhee, author of “Parenting Apart,” to bring us a raw and honest account

of how divorce impacts kids. The film creates an avenue for parents and children to talk openly and honestly about divorce.

Ellen and Christina shared with Heather Hetchler of *StepMom Magazine* their hopes for “SPLIT” and their passion for creating healthy and effective dialogue surrounding divorce. The film is thought provoking. Once you view the film, you will be moved to watch it with your children.

**Heather:** As the producer of this film project, how would you best describe “SPLIT”?

**ELLEN:** “SPLIT” is an account of divorce through the eyes and lives of real children. It is a collaboration with 12 kids ranging in age from 6 to 12. They share their experiences and their wisdom in a very straightforward way. This film will raise consciousness and create conversation around divorce.

**What was the inspiration behind “SPLIT”?**

**ELLEN:** My parents divorced when I was a child, and I felt very isolated. Folks just didn’t talk about divorce with kids back then. Years later, when my children’s father and I separated, I looked for resources to help our kids through this change and found very little. I wanted to create conversation for kids and for parents, and so I created “SPLIT.”

“SPLIT” is interspersed with illustrations that beautifully reflect the moods of the children being interviewed.

**Who is the audience for “SPLIT”?**

**CHRISTINA:** Originally, the goal was to create a film for kids. However, as the project evolved it became clear that this movie had a much broader reach. Along with helping kids and parents find a way to talk about divorce, “SPLIT” is also a powerful resource that can be used by stepfamilies, grandparents, schools, educators, mediators, family lawyers, counselors, clergy and therapists.



*"It's not like what you think really. We're still a family but we don't live in the same house anymore ... that's all."*

—JONAH

**ELLEN:** All children should see "SPLIT." Children whose parents are divorcing and those who need to have a better understanding of what their friends are going through will benefit from viewing this film. The film creates empathy and compassion, allowing children who haven't been personally touched by divorce to better understand and help their friends who are.

**What do you hope viewers take away from the film?**

**CHRISTINA:** A sense of hope. Although divorce is hard for kids, it doesn't have to overshadow the rest of children's lives. Being able to talk about the changes divorce brings to family life makes a big difference. "SPLIT" empowers kids and lets them know it is OK to talk about their feelings. And when meaningful conversations start happening, healing usually follows.

**ELLEN:** "SPLIT" will give comfort and courage to children whose parents are separating. They will be encouraged by the straightforward stories of kids who have not only survived divorce but are happy and have adjusted well to the changes.

**You both mentioned that "SPLIT" could be a gateway to spur communication between parents and children. What needs should be addressed?**

**CHRISTINA:** The reality is no matter how much you love your kids, we don't always know how our children are feeling. When parents "SPLIT" up, it adds a new twist to things. It's not unusual for kids to hold back their feelings or filter what they say to their



"SPLIT" contains interviews with children ages 6 to 12 who offer insight, share personal stories and talk about how their parents' divorces affects their lives.



*"I go back and forth for my birthdays. This time for my birthday I'm going to my Dad's house and then next year I'm going to go to my Mom's. But sometimes I wish could have my birthday at my Mom's ... but I want it to be fair."*

—TEA

parents about the divorce. Sometimes it's because they're worried about making things worse. Other times, kids may be afraid that sharing how they really feel could upset or hurt a parent's feelings. As a result, kids often are left to navigate lots of stressful situations related to divorce, remarriage and stepfamily life that we as parents never know about.

"SPLIT" helps kids understand they're not alone. By relating to the kids in the film, children watching the program can better share their struggles and parents can do a better job of helping them. For families who are further along on the journey, "SPLIT" serves as a way for them to take a look at how far they've come. Perspective is a real gift that this film has to offer.

**ELLEN:** Parents need to be encouraged to move through their divorce with less conflict, for everyone's sake. And parents need to really listen to their kids. So often parents are so overwhelmed by the changes in their lives that they have little available bandwidth for really listening to the needs of their kids. Also, kids are often caretaking their stressed or anxious parents during the transition, and they need to be encouraged to speak up and share their feelings. "SPLIT" will encourage kids to talk and will give parents the opportunity to hear the things that their own children may not be sharing with them directly.

In the film, Eva shared that she wanted some answers from her parents about what was happening. When she got none, her

imagination went wild, creating bigger problems than really existed.

Also, the kids in “SPLIT” talk about when their parents repartner. Jonah shared the weight that was lifted from his heart when his father gave him “permission” to like his mom’s boyfriend.

### What is your favorite part of being involved in this film project?

**CHRISTINA:** I’d have to say seeing people’s reaction to “SPLIT.” I had the pleasure of attending the first screening in San Francisco and meeting all of the kids who were involved in the project. It was amazing to be with an audience of over 300 people and feel the energy in the room. Since that time, I’ve been overwhelmed by the way parents, professionals and organizations have enthusiastically embraced “SPLIT.” Of course, working with Ellen and the “SPLIT” team has been icing on the cake.

**ELLEN:** I am excited about the positive impact this film will have on parents, kids and society. My biggest hope is that it will give kids courage to talk about what they are going through and get the support they need. This film can also help neutralize the shame that can often go with divorce.

### How can people access this movie?

**CHRISTINA:** The DVD can be purchased on the website, [www.SPLITfilm.org](http://www.SPLITfilm.org). In addition, film discussion guides will be available in January. One will be for parents and the other for professionals who work with separated and divorcing parents. “SPLIT” is also an excellent tool to use in workshops, support groups and in mediation.

### Should parents watch it prior to the children viewing it?

**CHRISTINA:** I would definitely recommend that parents watch the film before showing it to their children. Here’s why: One of the things we’ve discovered is that it isn’t always easy for parents to watch “SPLIT.” Hearing these kids talk openly and honestly about divorce really hits home. Because kids are

very sensitive to parent stress and getting upset, it’s best if parents preview the film when their children aren’t around. That way, if something does come up, parents have the ability to deal with their feelings without exposing their emotions to their kids. Watching the film first also gives parents a chance to think about what parts of the film might be challenging for their children or to pick out segments of the film that may be important to focus on when they watch it together.

### How can StepMom Magazine readers connect with you?

**ELLEN:** Visit us at [www.SPLITfilm.org](http://www.SPLITfilm.org) to learn more and get the DVD. Friend us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/SPLITfilm](http://www.facebook.com/SPLITfilm).

**CHRISTINA:** Connect with me at [www.divorceandchildren.com](http://www.divorceandchildren.com) or on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/divorceandchildren](http://www.facebook.com/divorceandchildren).

**T**he film “SPLIT” creates a conversation around the impact of divorce and can help stepparents better understand the hurt their stepchildren may be carrying and how that can impact their relationship.

This is a must-see film. I encourage you to watch it as a couple and then with each child. One of the children in the movie shares “there are wonderful ways to have families.” Divorce does not define a child, but it does impact them. Understanding their thoughts and emotions will empower them and you as a parent to help them feel understood and free to share what’s in their hearts. ■



**HEATHER HETCHLER, M.A.**, has a passion for equipping stepmoms to thrive. She is the Founder of [www.CafeSmom.com](http://www.CafeSmom.com), which brings positive resources, encouragement and support to stepmothers. She speaks about divorce recovery and stepfamily issues and is the co-author of “Unwrapping The Gift of Stepfamily Peace.” As a stepmom coach, her passion is to help stepmothers define their own positive path to success. As a full-time mom and stepmom, Heather resides in Cleveland with her husband, four children and two stepchildren.