

## Divorced parents can't be zipped together

Divorce is not a game, but a serious crisis in the lives of children and their parents. But a Jerusalem family therapist and her colleagues have nevertheless produced what they claim is the world's first research-based psychological computer game for helping children deal with divorce and separation. It's a tall order, and Chaya Harash, who has a master's in social work and more than 25 years' experience in family, couples, children and divorce therapy, thinks their game can get children of broken families to open up and express and deal with their fears, anxieties, guilt and confusion.

Through 35 episodes, the program stars an eponymous character called Moose, who lives happily on a small island with his parents, the king and queen of Zipland. The island is held together by a huge zipper, but when hit by an earthquake, the land rips into two, sending Moose alone on a raft floating in the ocean, full of sadness, self-reproach and anxiety about why it happened, what the future will bring and whether he, Humpty Dumpty-like, will ever be able to zip the island back together again and reunite

his parents.

Working with psychologist Dr. Daniel Gottlieb and social worker Hazel Zemel, Harash prefers that children, especially the younger ones, play the game along with at least one parent at their side. It can also be used by professional therapists in group or individual sessions, and her startup company

is also seeking English-speaking divorced parents who want to enroll their children in free, weekly interactive workshops (in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv) using this game. A free demo can be downloaded from the Web site to see if it appeals to you.

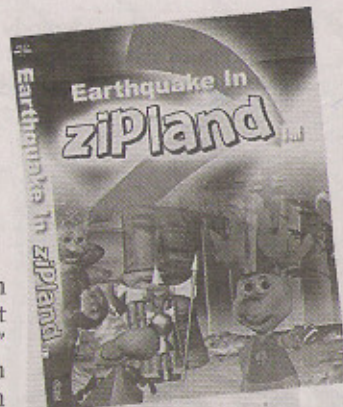
At face value, *Earthquake in Zipland* is like any other quest game, with objects – such as a fish, grain of sand or dictionary – having to be collected in the inventory and used later; any child can play it. But for children whose parents have separated or divorced, the on-disk quest journal and a personal journal protected by a password allow him or her to express innermost thoughts and reactions to Moose's own wrestling with his emotions.

Any such child will identify with

Moose's sentiments, such as "it's tough being caught in the middle all the time" or "I wonder how much longer this tension between them will go on." At a junction in the forest, Moose is in a quandary whether to go to his mother or father in opposite directions.

The king and queen – whose icons appear on opposite corners of the screen at all times and can often be accessed for comment or help – argue quite a bit. Both occasionally fire off snide remarks (as when the queen invites Moose home to eat her chocolate cake, and the king says she wasn't known for her baking). But the arguing is not vicious, as this would certainly be painful for the child. And in the printed guide, parents are strongly advised not to argue or to denigrate the other parent in front of their kids.

There is no conventional happy ending, as a child of divorce will have to



*Earthquake in Zipland:*  
A CD-ROM in  
English by Zipland  
Interactive Ltd.

([www.ziplandinteractive.com](http://www.ziplandinteractive.com)) of Jerusalem,  
comes with an 80-page  
English-language  
parents' guide, requires  
a Pentium PC and  
Windows 98, Windows  
XP or higher  
recommended, for ages  
seven to 13, \$60 for  
mailed package and  
\$50 when downloaded  
from Internet; special  
edition for therapists  
\$130 for mailed  
package and \$130 for  
download.

Rating: ★★ ★

reconcile himself to the fact that his parents will not "zip together" again and is made to understand that the fissure is permanent. But by the end, the child is

empowered, helped to understand the parents' motivations and given hope for the future and his/her own ability to develop loving relationships despite personal experience.

The game's main shortcoming is its very old-fashioned graphics – a decade at least behind those of large videogame companies – which may put off children used to today's high-grade standards. Zipland will have to upgrade them, even though a small startup can't easily access the resources required. If it can, additional psychol-

ogy-based computer games to help children cope with the emotional problems of a dear one's death, disability, chronic disease and other problems should logically follow.