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## Spanish parents faking divorce to get children into best schools

- Separation gains priority in allocation of places
- Detectives hired to snoop on cheating rival families

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**Graham Keeley** in Barcelona  
The Guardian, Wednesday March 19 2008

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Most British parents will do almost anything to get their children into the best school, but perhaps few would go to the lengths of some Spanish couples.

In Spain, entry into secondary school is based on a points system. Judges in Seville believe that some parents are divorcing just to earn the crucial points needed to get their offspring into the top schools. Since last year, children of divorced or separated couples get two extra points when education authorities decide which school the offspring will go to.

The family courts in the Andalusian capital saw a dramatic rise in the divorce rate just when school places were being decided. The number of divorces or official separations rose from 259 in January 2007 to 387 in March 2007.

"The number of divorce cases were exceptionally high," said a court spokeswoman. "We are examining each case to see if they are genuine."

Judges were particularly dubious about how keen many couples were keen to wrap up their divorces before the March 31 deadline for applications for school places. Registering a divorce normally takes two to three weeks, but some couples seem in a greater rush to complete the process, said another court source.

Parents who manipulate the system are helped by the "express divorce", which became law in 2005. And some judges found that a few weeks after couples asked for official separations, they ended up in front of the same court to request reconciliation - just after they completed their school applications.

"If it is proved parents provided false information then their applications may be rejected," said an education spokeswoman for the regional government.

Andalucia's education authorities received 731 claims last year from the public accusing parents of faking school place applications. Twenty six cases of fraud were uncovered, involving couples who claimed to be divorced or separated in order to win extra school points, but were actually living together. No police action was taken but the school entry applications for children of the offending couples were dismissed.

Some parents have called in private investigators to snoop on rivals. Rausa and Rausa, a detective agency in Seville, has seen a sharp rise in cases involving parents who believe other parents are lying about living in the right catchment areas, faking their earnings and faking disability to get their offspring into the right school.

"Parents are capable of doing anything to get their children into schools. The philosophy is ruthless," said José Miguel Iglesias, the agency's head. "It is 'If I shoot those above me on the list, then my child gets in'."

If couples want to split or get back together it has to be registered with the authorities in Spain. It is not an offence to go through a false divorce or ask for a bogus official separation.

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